SUCCESSION PLANNING IN CHARTER MANAGEMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Sustaining the Future for Charter Schools and Their Students
SUCCESSION PLANNING
in Charter Management Organizations

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contracted with Plattner Communications for research, writing and interactive tool development on succession planning in charter management organizations.

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We were fortunate to receive guidance in our work from two national experts in non-profit succession planning – Tom Adams of Transition Guides and Tim Wolfred of Wolfred Consulting. Noah Wepman at the Gates Foundation provided thoughtful advice and continual support. We very much valued the feedback we received from the Center for Reinventing Public Education and from WestEd.

And we are most grateful to dozens of individuals who run charters or serve on charter boards and who run other non-profits. They made time for us, tolerated our questions, shared their stories, and offered their views on a critical and often delicate subject.

January 2012
Who Will Take Your Place?

The report in front of you is important. It is brief, clear, and actionable and I hope you indeed act upon it.

When the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned this work, I thought about it as leadership succession planning. I knew it was critical; I’d been through it.

But what this work is really about is planning for the sustained future of organizations that are successfully educating hundreds of thousands of students across the nation—sustainability planning.

I wish I had such a report long before I considered leaving Aspire Public Charter Schools, which I founded and led for nine years. We did a pretty good job in the transition to new leadership, but the planning and my execution of it could have been better. And what I know from both personal experience and these research findings is that too few charter management organizations have given anywhere enough thought to sustaining their work when—not if—their founders leave.

I also understand why. When you are running a CMO or leading its board, there are plenty of immediate and urgent issues to deal with. It is easy to put succession planning in the pile of important things to do later. And it is also simply a difficult subject to talk about inside an organization accompanied by a feeling that it almost can create bad luck by starting the conversation.

CMOs, like other non-profit organizations, are likely to need some consulting assistance to do such planning well and I’m hoping the philanthropic community can help. It is in our own self-interest to do so to sustain our investments in successful charter schools.
**Betting the Farm**

Most Americans recognize the value of life insurance, but not everyone buys it. Some people feel they don’t need it, and some can’t afford it. And some simply are willing to bet on their luck.

This last group may be lucky, but more predictable is that their heirs will pay for the lack of investment in the future.

Leadership succession planning is a form of life insurance for organizations that want to sustain their work over time. In the corporate world, boards and shareholders demand succession plans and devote resources to identifying and developing the leaders who will eventually take over.

*Planning for a leadership transition is not a one-time event, but an ongoing practice focused on defining an organization’s strategic vision, identifying the leadership skills necessary to carry out that vision, and recruiting talented individuals who have or who can develop those skills.*

There is little evidence of succession planning in the nonprofit world, and that includes charter management organizations (CMOs). A major study of nonprofits in 2006 found more than 7 in 10 had no succession plan, and that makes them particularly vulnerable when a leadership transition occurs.

We surveyed leaders and board members of high-performing CMOs and found uncomfortably similar numbers. While they see the importance of planning for leadership change, only 25 percent of those surveyed said their organizations had strategic plans that included a succession plan.

In the absence of planning, says Ursula Wright of the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), CMOs are as vulnerable as any other nonprofit organization to crises in leadership transition. “You cannot afford not to be doing this,” she concludes.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation agrees. High performing CMOs are demonstrating considerable academic success for students, particularly those who are poor and of color. These CMOs are proving that all students can learn at high standards—can be college and career ready—and proving it increasingly at scale. But they are as vulnerable as other nonprofits to stumbling through leadership changes.

The Gates Foundation funded our research effort to understand the reality of succession planning for high-performing CMOs, and to provide assistance to make such planning routine practice.

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The research supporting this report included a quantitative survey of CMO leaders and board members; qualitative interviews with individual leaders; case studies of organizations that have been through leadership changes; consultation with leading experts in succession planning within non-profit organizations and with academics who have studied the issue.

Let us be blunt with four observations:

- **Succession planning is important**
- **There are consequences for failure to plan**
- **Too few CMOs are doing succession planning**
- **You don’t have to repeat the mistakes of others**

In addition to the narrative that follows, we also produced online, interactive planning tools to make it easier for CMO leaders to quickly assess their individual situations and engage in succession planning.
SUCCESSION PLANNING: What it is and why it matters

Succession planning in its simplest form is a written statement of the actions an organization will take in a change of leadership. At its proactive best, an organization undertakes strategic succession planning as part of an ongoing commitment to its long-term sustainability.

In his monograph, Building Leaderful Organizations: Succession Planning for Non-Profits, Tim Wolfred describes three categories of planning:

- **Emergency succession planning** pretty much speaks for itself—who will replace someone who leaves a board or leadership position with little or no notice?

- The **departure defined succession** is the think-ahead process that is utilized when there's sufficient notice to assess what the organization needs, search for a match, and celebrate the going and coming of leadership.

- **Strategic succession planning** is not confined to a predetermined period of time, but is a recurring, often annual, set of tasks that include figuring out where the organization is in its development, creating or revising job descriptions to match the need, developing or honing recruitment and talent development efforts, and developing or revising emergency succession and a longer-horizon succession plan.

Succession planning for a transition in leadership is not a new concept—in the private sector. Consider the burden on Apple to replace its founder, Steve Jobs, when he died in October 2011. The discussion was not whether Apple had a succession plan, but whether the company would adhere to the plan in place. (It did.)

In contrast, too many leaders in non-profit organizations are just realizing the need for such planning, often in response to a nightmare they've observed when a founder leaves and an organization goes under. Succession planning seems to be one of those good management practices that don't get much credit when everything goes smoothly, but whose absence when needed is obvious and ugly.

The lack of planning is one of particular importance to charter management organizations, given their vulnerability as a relatively new entity in the world of education whose success, or lack of it, is being closely observed by supporters and detractors alike. What will happen to the organization when that charismatic, visionary, risk-taking founder decides to leave? Will the leadership team also leave, followed quickly by funders?
Planning consultant Deborah Linnell envisions challenges for any non-profit experiencing a departure of the founder. “Good founder or bad founder, the collective nonprofit story is this: Eventually the founder leaves. The leaving is often disruptive for the organization and emotionally charged for the people involved.” (read more from the article)

Disruption is a good choice of words to describe the effect of a founder departure at Aspire Public Schools in California. “Three years out there are still bumps in the road,” said successor James Wilcox. Emotionally charged is how Jason Bernal would describe his “surprise-to-me” selection as a successor CEO at YES Prep in Houston. The leadership transitions at these two high-performing CMOs make the case for thoughtful succession planning – and the consequences of the lack of it.

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TRANSITIONS AND TREMORS: The consequences of insufficient planning

Aspire Public Schools experienced a leadership transition in 2009 when founder Don Shalvey accepted a position at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In spring of 2011, founder Chris Barbic of YES Prep announced his move to Tennessee’s Achievement School District and announced a successor within the same week. Both organizations weathered the changes, but board members and executives noted organizational tremors that could have been avoided, and identified issues that caused them, including:

- the surprising announcement
- communication shortcomings
- uncertainty over who’s in charge
- the speed and duration of the transition.

At YES Prep in Houston (read the case study), founder Chris Barbic’s departure announcement, the decision on replacement, and announcement of a successor all took place within a week. Board chair Joe Greenberg described a board that quickly acted on Barbic’s recommendation of an internal candidate who they felt had earned the respect of the organization and could step into the job. But the selection was a surprise to the candidate, Jason Bernal. “There was no succession planning,” he said. “It wasn’t even in my 10-year plan. We never talked about this even being a possibility until the day Chris mentioned it.”

At Aspire, a regional CMO in California, the departure announcement and succession announcement were equally quick, but the speed was deliberate, says founder Don Shalvey, who had been working with the board on leadership development and succession planning since 2003. “My whole belief around planning for succession was that this is one action. I resign, let the staff know, and announce the successor. I’ve been in too many situations where you create periods of chaos (by spacing it out). No good was coming to Aspire by creating uncertainty and more unknowns.”

For successor James Wilcox, his selection was also something of a surprise. “The first conversation we had was when Don told me that he was leaving.”

At both YES Prep and Aspire, the powerful influence of the founder and his strong relationship with the board meant that the decision on a successor played out only in the boardroom, leaving the leadership team in a temporary vacuum. Elise Darwish, Chief Academic Officer of Aspire, said the transition was easy, but the selection was messy because it lacked transparency—no one knew what criteria were being considered, and who might be considered.

Mark DiBella, Vice President of Operations at YES Prep, describes the same circumstance in Houston. While there was support for Bernal’s selection, the basis of his selection was not made clear, and everyone on the team wondered, “Why not me?” “A process would have helped that,” DiBella concludes.
Jennifer Hines, Yes Prep director of People and Programs, said the Barbic-Bernal transition was “both sudden and long.” The sudden announcement followed by three-month transition period became a time of uncertainty in terms of who was actually leading and who had the decision-making authority.

Reflecting on the lack of planning for the inevitability of a founder departure, Hines said, “We knew Chris could be leaving. No one did anything about it.” Asked separately about this omission, both board member Joe Greenberg and CEO Bernal said, “It won’t happen again.”

**It’s not rocket science—but it’s still not happening**

Creating a succession plan is not rocket science, said Richard Beattie, founder of New Visions for Public Schools in New York City. But that doesn’t mean CMOs have such a plan in place.

In November, we surveyed CMO leaders and board members. Nearly 9 in 10 said they have a strategic plan for their organization; about 8 in 10 said succession planning is either important or a high priority; but only 1 in 4 said they have strategic plans that deal with top leadership succession.

“There are a handful of CMOs who are being very formulistic and smart about succession planning,” says Ursula Wright of NAPCS. A second tier includes the vast majority of CMOs who know they should do it but are not really doing it. But for the bottom tier, “Succession planning is not on their radar at all.”

Our survey findings confirm Wright’s analysis. In the first tier are 25% of respondents who report they have a plan to identify the next leader. Making planning a priority helps: Of those one-third of organizations who place a high priority on succession planning, most consider themselves prepared for a transition.

In the second tier are organizations that have worked on at least one part of the puzzle: emergency planning. Seventy-two percent said they could determine a successor if the leader was incapacitated or resigned. Also in this category are those who can explain why they are not actively planning for departure. As one survey respondent said: “It would be a higher priority if it looked like our CEO was on the verge of departing any time soon. Given the work we have yet to accomplish, it would be somewhat earth shattering to have her announce her departure anytime in the next couple of years.”

And in the bottom tier are the 27% that were unsure whether succession planning was a priority or not, or didn’t think their CMO was prepared for succession. The lack of certainty was expressed this way: “This makes me wonder if our CEO would respond differently. He may have a succession plan in his head.”

We surveyed only leaders and board members in CMOs, not those in individual charter schools. But we know from a 2007 University of Washington survey that CMOs are more likely to have succession plans than other charters. We also think simply asking the survey questions may have prompted additional planning by CMOs.

Beyond the survey, we also conducted extensive interviews with CMO leaders and board members. Several leaders who think their efforts fall short of some ideal of succession planning have
emergency plans in place. Many are building a strong bench of potential successors, and many are supporting those potential candidates with opportunities for skill development.

Three themes are offered by leaders at these organizations to explain the absence of a full-scale succession plan:

- We can take care of it when we need to.
- We have other, more important things to attend to.
- We are building the bench and have a good idea who to turn to.

At least a few leaders have developed components of a succession plan but believe there is more to be done on this front.

Those who are most comfortable with their current position have given some thought to who might succeed them, have written at least a one-page plan to satisfy a funder or accreditation process, or have confidence that either the organization’s reputation or the board’s networks will be sufficient to draw talented candidates.

David Chizewer, board chair of Chicago International Charter Schools, described being just shy of comfortable in regard to leadership transition.

“My sense is the organization would still be able to function and we wouldn’t have major problems … It’s not that we’re not strategic and forward looking, but we’re strategic and forward looking about the things that are occurring, more directly related to improving academic outcomes and instruction.”

### CMOs may not have a formal plan, but most feel prepared for a change in leadership

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Lessons from CMO leaders and planning experts

A small community of non-profit succession experts has created books and monographs to guide the process of emergency, departure-defined, and strategic succession planning. This set of lessons is drawn from interviews with them and a review of their body of work, as well as from interviews with leaders in CMOs who have experienced transitions.

1. **Start the conversation now—not until it’s too late.** Succession planning may not be rocket science, but it does require time and resources, and shouldn’t happen over a weekend or in an emergency meeting of the board. The question of who starts the conversation can be tricky: neither the board nor the CEO wants to send the wrong message—We want you to leave; I want to leave. Given the number of funders that are now requesting an emergency succession plan, it’s reasonable for the board to initiate the conversation as part of their oversight.

2. **Understand where you are in the life cycle of the organization—and the skills required for your leaders and board at that stage.** Many CMOs have moved from startup to growth and are increasingly focused on sustainability. The charismatic leader gets the organization started, says Green Dot Public Schools board member Shane Martin, “but that style may not be necessary to transform the CMO from startup to sustainable.”

Green Dot would not be what it is today without the passionate leadership of founder Steve Barr, Martin says, adding that Barr was the right guy at the right time. But the landscape changed and the skills required shifted from visionary to sustainability – both for the board and the CEO.

Chizewer recalls the earlier years of Chicago International Charter Schools when the organization was more focused on growth and getting to a particular size. Now the focus is on academic achievement, accountability and assessment, and the work of the board is to decide the leadership skills most critical to the organization. “Is it the academics, or is it organization and management? It’s hard to find someone who has everything. It’s easy to say you want everything, but you’re not going to find it, so you really have to focus your priorities.”

Board members at Green Dot and YES Prep described shifts in the board’s role that are occurring as the result of transition in a founder-led CMO. A board that was willing to support the founder’s agenda without much in the way of oversight or evaluation is being reshaped, board chair Shane Martin of Green Dot explained, to assume greater governance, fiduciary, and fundraising responsibilities. Green Dot engaged a consultant to help recruit a “top-quality” board, and in the process, has revised its by-laws and created clear expectations for board member participation in meetings and sub-committee work.

The number one learning from the recent transition at Yes Prep, board chair Joe Greenberg said, was the need to ensure broader exposure of the leadership team to the board. “There was a lack of understanding of what people in the organization were doing and a lack of confidence in our decision making that could have been different if the interaction had been different,” said Jennifer Hines. Both the board and the leadership team are committed to a more open working relationship that includes frequent presentations by various members of the team.
3. Consider using a consultant or outside facilitator. You can find lists of leadership skills, organizational self-assessments, and templates to fill in—but having the template is not always enough. Founder successions, in particular, call for the steady, neutral and experienced counsel of someone who understands leadership searches, organizational dynamics, and the emotional climate of a change process.

4. Make an emergency plan—and hold a fire drill. Nearly three quarters of organizations believe they are prepared to handle an emergency succession. CEO Beth Purvis of Chicago International Charter Schools (read the case study) has taken emergency planning one step further: For every job in the organization, there is someone who can step in and do that job, or at a minimum, find the job responsibilities on the server and consult a hefty binder of instructions. A string of maternity leaves provided proof that no one is indispensable for long. Purvis says, “I’m saying to the board, I know you guys love me, but if I’m gone, the leadership team wouldn’t even tell you for a month.”

5. Give yourself options for finding the next leader by building your own bench. About 7 in 10 survey respondents indicate they have a leadership development program—and each of the CMOs interviewed for this study are focused on building the bench. Bob Hughes, President at New Visions for Public Schools (read the case study) has identified, groomed, and in some cases, rejected prospective successors. He now has a stable leadership team whose development he continues to promote. “I think leadership is distributed enough that it’s not dependent on me. Certainly that’s the goal.”

John Danner, CEO of Rocketship Education, says his organization is “building a farm system everywhere we can” and has identified a successor, one that Danner has spent a number of years moving up through the ranks. The successor will continue to work in various roles with Danner’s oversight before being announced to the organization, to avoid having Danner become a lame duck.

Jennifer Hines reports that a huge takeaway from the recent succession at YES Prep (read the case study) is learning how to build the capacity of leaders who are within striking distance of being a successor.

6. A good succession plan includes a communication plan. A communication plan takes into account the culture of the organization, and considers who will need to be informed when a succession occurs, as well as how and by whom. How communication occurs will vary from one organization to the next, but it should reflect and respect existing communication practices.

7. Give the reins to the successor. From New York to Houston to San Francisco, new and seasoned CEOs and board members delivered this message: The most important thing a founder can do in the transition process is to hand over the reins and let the successor put his or her stamp on the organization. “It’s not going to be my vision anymore,” says founder Beattie of New Visions. “It’s going to be the successor’s vision. You have to step out of the way.”

Successors need to find their own voice and figure out how they are going to lead an organization that is not theirs at the start, says James Wilcox of Aspire. “It is not their organization, it is the founder’s organization.” For the organization to move forward, he says, the founder has to give the successor some space by staying away, and the successor has to make his or her own way.
8. **Provide a coach for the new leader.** The coach might be the founder who can introduce the successor to external stakeholders: political players, supporters, and funders. Or the coach might be someone who can help identify and fill skill gaps. At New Visions, when Bob Hughes was selected to follow Founding President Beth Lief, he hired a former executive director to bring him up to speed on managing the organization. “That coaching relationship compensated for the significant number of weaknesses that I had.”

The coach could be second in command, as was the CFO at Chicago International who helped Purvis learn budgeting, finance, and bonds.

Rocketship Education has a management coach on staff who works 20 hours a week to meet one-on-one with the CMOs “top 10–15 people,” helping them actively work through challenges.
**Lessons learned from non-profits**

In an attempt to draw lessons from non-profits who have engaged in succession planning, researchers interviewed leaders in one long-established private high school and two relatively young non-profits serving youth.

**Succession planning as an ongoing activity**

First Place for Youth, founded in 1998, helps young people get their footing as they transition from their foster care placements to independent living. With assistance from one of their funders, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, First Place has developed an emergency succession plan (ESP), a departure-defined succession plan, and created a Department of Talent focused on preparing the organization for planned and unplanned leadership changes.

Succession planning at First Place for Youth has evolved into practices to “grow people into the next position,” says Deanne Pearn, co-founder. The organization’s employee review system is now based on measurable outcomes and functions, and employs a web-based program to track progress of their student clients and measure employee outcomes tied to the goals of those students.

Managers in the organization know how to build the competencies of a candidate through cross training in the organization, and know with confidence when that candidate is ready to move into a new role. A recent expansion to a Los Angeles site revealed exactly how well the pipeline is working. A regional manager moved from the Bay Area to Los Angeles, the Bay Area position was filled by a candidate ready to move up, and in turn, the candidate’s position was filled by another trained employee. “We only had to hire outside for an entry-level position,” Pearn said.

Her advice: Be intentional about making succession part of the organization’s on-going work.

**A systematic approach to talent management**

Summer Search offers year-round mentoring, college advising, and post-secondary supports for low-income youth in seven networked sites across the country. As part of their efforts to plan for leadership turnover in an organization that grew from serving 14 students in 1990 to 1600 in 2010, Summer Search has shifted human resources from a “policy and paperwork” position to a strategic position focused on talent management. One of the first steps was to institute competency-based job descriptions in an organization that lacked a process “to identify whether a person was doing the job that was needed.”

Summer Search has abandoned its early history of “sink or swim” for employees who were thrown into a new role, and is now more systematic about talent management—identifying positions, who’s likely to leave, someone in the organization who can fill the position, the skills needed to get them there, and finally, developing Individualized Development Plans. The organization has had several occasions to exercise emergency planning, given the number of maternity leaves, sabbaticals, and medical emergencies.

Summer Search has also been fortunate to have had “long on-ramps”—planned departures of 12- to 18 months which gave the organization the luxury of time “to think about who we should place in the position, and who we could prepare for the position,” says Jessica Vibbert, Vice President of Operations.

Create a plan—and make time to work the plan

Notre Dame De Nameur High School, a Catholic high school located in the Bay Area, made a concerted effort to find examples of succession plans in traditional education circles, searched vainly for examples in other Catholic schools, and ended up plowing new ground by developing a model emergency succession plan.

The ESP has all of the components of a comprehensive plan: job descriptions, responsibilities, and core competencies; organization charts; timelines; oversight; procedures to follow if the vacancy becomes permanent; contact information for the board, facilities, and faculty, as well as financial and legal support. The plan also explicitly includes how to locate key documents, who has access to them, and procedures for maintaining and updating these documents. The plan identifies emergency contacts and key relationships to the principal.

“My advice,” says Gleason, “is to make sure you have a plan in place and you have the time to work the plan. We know it should be an 18-month process, for a planned departure leadership transition, and we are going to be sure that we can be thoughtful as we move forward with that timeline.”
SUCCESSION PLANNING: Making it happen

John Danner of Rocketship Education says CMOs are not concerned enough about succession planning. “The lack of intentionality permeates the space. As long as nothing is threatening today, no one has to think about it.”

Clearly, it’s time to think about it.

For CMOs wary of the perils of leadership transition, or whose response to the concept is “don't mention it,” there are carrots and sticks to encourage a change of heart and direction. And for those persuaded to make planning a higher priority, there are tools and resources to propel the process.

**Carrots.** Some of the carrots, like the edible variety, improve vision and contribute to the health of the organization. Implementing succession planning can reduce some of the emotion—changing the conversation from the loss of the leader to the skills needed to successfully lead the organization. And the succession conversation can recalibrate the organization’s mission and vision.

Another carrot, according to James Wilcox of Aspire, is the opportunity to get ahead of what he sees as a tsunami of leadership transitions in the future, based on three vulnerabilities of CMOs:

- **Competition for talent with school districts and other organizations.**
- **“Life happens” for the young people who have populated charter school organizations.** People are going to have different variables in their life equation—marriage, children, career options—that will cause them to leave.
- **Budget crises and the stress that results. People will get either burnt out, or sick.**

A third carrot is support from funders for succession planning who see it as protecting their investments.

**Sticks.** The sticks include the prospect of temporary dysfunction (little stick), loss of funding support (big stick), and a downward spiral that can lead to dismantling an effective organization.

**Tools and resources.** We have identified research studies and materials that offer a deeper understanding of the issue, experts in the field who can support the work, and examples of templates or plans shared by CMOs and non-profits. These resources have been organized online and are accessible through a web-based interactive assessment that offers the user multiple points of entry along the spectrum of succession planning.

We hope high-performing CMOs see the value of real succession planning as in their own best interests.
The research

This report reflects findings from a study of succession planning in charter management organizations that utilized interviews of leaders in six CMOs, an electronic survey sent to 189 leaders in high-performing CMOs, and interviews of leaders in non-profit organizations. The report is part of a set of materials that includes case studies on the current state of succession planning at Chicago International Charter Schools, New Visions for Public Schools, and YES Prep Public Schools; and an electronic, interactive guide to succession planning accessible at www.publiccharters.org/additional-pages/leadership-succession.aspx.

In-person interviews were conducted with leaders at New Visions for Public Schools (NYC), Brighter Choice Charter Schools (Albany, NY), Chicago International Charter Schools (Chicago), Noble Network (Chicago), Alliance College-Ready Public Schools (Los Angeles), Green Dot (Los Angeles), YES Prep (Houston). Telephone interviews were conducted with leaders from Aspire Charter Schools (San Francisco), First Place for Youth, Notre Dame de Namur High School, Rocketship Education, and SummerSearch, and with four individuals with expertise in the field of succession planning.

101 respondents (27 CEOs, six CFOs, 11 board members, three school principals, and 44 others) participated in the surveys. Twenty-five respondents participated in the initial survey. After that initial survey, the wording of a few questions was slightly modified, and the modified survey was then administered in October and early November to 49 respondents, and again in later November to 27 respondents. DHM Research in Portland, Oregon, analyzed the responses.
Resources

Books


Monographs and Articles


