



Charter School Governing Board Composition



A Toolkit for Board Members





The National Charter School Resource Center (www.charterschoolcenter.ed.gov) is dedicated to supporting the development of high-quality charter schools. The NCSRC provides technical assistance to sector stakeholders and has a comprehensive collection of online resources addressing the challenges charter schools face. The NCSRC is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and led by education consulting firm Safal Partners.

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Safal Partners (www.safalpartners.com) is a mission-driven strategy consulting firm that supports education reform efforts at the federal, state, district, and school levels.

CharterBoardPartners

great boards for great schools

Charter Board Partners (www.charterboards.org), a national nonprofit that works to ensure that the boards governing public charter schools are focused on quality, equity, and accountability.

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INTRODUCTION

Every child deserves to attend an excellent school. Public charter schools are governed by independent boards, and great charter schools need great boards. Serving on a charter school board is an excellent way to have a substantial, and ongoing, impact on a school and in your community. Charter Board Partners (CBP) supports charter school boards to be their best. This resource¹ is designed to support boards in building the best membership to ensure student success.

I. BUILDING YOUR BOARD

Having the right skills and experience around the board table is essential to effective governance. Charter school boards need the right mix of people who bring the skills, perspectives, experiences, and networks the board needs to achieve its goals. Board size may be determined by local authorizers and will be affected by the stage your board is in (founding boards may be smaller than fully operational boards), however CBP recommends that there are enough members to effectively staff the committees and ensure work gets accomplished. Effective boards build a deliberate and strategic recruiting process to maintain a balanced board composition. Read on for tips on how to develop a successful recruiting process, recruit purposefully for diversity, and select the right new board members.

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE RECRUITING PROCESS

Before launching into the search for new board members, boards need to set up a system that they will follow for every search. This allows for consistency and fairness, and ensures you get the right people around the table. Following are steps to get your board on its way.

1. Build a strong governance committee.

Governance committees are responsible for designing and running a board member recruiting process. Governance committees drive the process, assess board needs in relation to goals, inventory current composition, and recruit and interview new members to the board. Make sure this committee knows its duties and is fully “staffed” with board members. Recruiting talented board members is a process that requires a significant investment of time and should not be left to a committee of one individual.

Governance committees should document the board’s recruiting process and share it with the full board so that they are prepared to play their role in securing high-performing board members.

2. Create/review key recruiting documents and interview process.

Before the board launches the recruiting process, it is critical to prepare. Boards need to share key information with candidates such as a Board Member Agreement and Bylaws in the interview process. Approaching candidates prepared with this information demonstrates that the board is organized, efficient, and transparent.

¹ The primer is comprised of a series of tools offered to CBP clients. They have been edited for the purposes of this report. CBP acknowledges all people who wrote the original tools.

3. Determine the board composition needed to achieve the board's goals over next three years.

Board member recruitment should directly align with the school's strategic plan and goals. Your board will need people with different skillsets depending on what you are trying to achieve.

For example, if your school needs to acquire a new building in three years because the strategic plan articulates plans for expansion, incorporate that goal into your recruiting plan. Consider what kind of real estate expertise you need on the board (e.g., finance, law, construction, commercial leasing, etc.) so you build the membership needed to open the school's new doors on time.

Also, ask the committee chairs to inform the governance committee of their upcoming needs. Encourage your board to be as specific as possible in documenting what they might like the new member to accomplish. For example, building on the real estate example above, the facilities committee may request recruiting someone with construction expertise. Adding a board member with specific, relevant knowledge will provide needed leadership and guidance throughout the school's upcoming construction project. Specifying construction expertise helps the governance committee identify which real estate expertise would be most valuable.

As you look forward, also consider board member succession.

- What are the dates that each officer will complete board service?
- Which board members' terms expire in the next few years?
- How should the board consider proactively filling these vacancies?

While every school has different specific recruiting needs depending on its lifecycle, goals, and current status, there are key categories of skills that are essential for any board including:

- **Finance**
- **Fundraising**
- **Real estate**
- **Leadership**
- **Governance**
- **Communications/marketing**
- **Education**
- **Human resources**
- **Legal**
- **Strategic planning**
- **Experience relevant to the organization's mission**

4. Assess current board composition.

Now that you know where your board composition needs to go, assess the skills, demographics, and characteristics your current board members bring to the table. Consider the following:

- Do you have enough people on each committee to manage the committee's workload? Do not underestimate the committee hours needed to deliver on the work promised. CBP recommends at least three members serve on each committee.
- Do you have the right mix of skills to accomplish the board's long-term goals?

- Do you have the right mix of working styles, available time, networks, and personalities for fruitful discussion, delivery of work, and overall leadership? Boards need members who will:
 - Believe that all kids can succeed at the highest level regardless of income.
 - Rise to the high stakes nature of the board membership role.
 - Make the time, with a “no excuses” commitment.
 - Ask hard questions, even when they do not know the answers.
 - Make hard decisions.
 - Keep a sense of humor

Create a thorough board inventory to track current board members’ strengths and the characteristics needed for future members to maintain a healthy and effective board.

5. Compare current composition to future needs and create recruiting priorities.

Once you know what skills your board needs, you can hone in on recruiting. Remember, these recruiting priorities are your guideposts—no one individual will have all of your priority skills, experience, demographics, and perspectives. Articulate your recruiting priorities in writing and share them with the full board so they can be prepared to help where needed and contribute to recruiting these amazing people.

6. Start recruiting!

Now that you have clarity on who you are trying to recruit, start brainstorming on how you are going to find these people. Here’s an example of how one board defined its priorities and began a plan to find the people who are the right fit:

Recruiting Priorities	Ideas for where to start	Timeline
Finance expertise especially around creating budgets and presenting financial projections	--Jan’s PricewaterhouseCoopers neighbor --Local Chamber of Commerce (Beth knows someone there) --Beth’s accountant’s firm	Initial contact with 5 people by September 1; interviews set with 2 by September 15
Emerging leaders who have all-around strong strategy and writing skills who can work with committees to complete their part of the applications.	--Business school alumni groups (Sam can talk to his cousin) --McKinsey, etc. (get intro to local office)	Initial contact with 3 people by September 1; interviews set with 2 by September 15
Individual who might bring the perspective of our target parent community to ensure we are building a school that will meet community needs	--parent advocacy groups (find that guy who spoke at that conference) --contact local elected officials/campaign organizers (Jan knows people here)	Initial contact with 6 people by September 1; group lunch for 10 people by September 15; interviews set with 3 by October 1

Once your governance committee has identified prospects, they should develop and articulate a recruiting and interview plan with deadlines and assign tasks to board members and school leadership as appropriate.

RECRUITING FOR DIVERSITY

Boards comprised of directors with diverse skills and backgrounds tend to outperform boards lacking a varied composition². Diversity encompasses identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, socio-economic background, age, physical ability, religious beliefs, political beliefs, ideologies, and other attributes that make each of us unique. When we talk about board diversity, we mean all of that plus a complex set of professional skills, experience level, community clout, and personality traits that make a governing body effective. Consider the following recommendations for engaging in a purposeful process to diversify your board:

1. Become comfortable speaking about racial and ethnic diversity or the lack thereof.

The reality in our country is that race, class, and academic achievement intersect in meaningful and important ways. All of us who work in education must be comfortable naming and discussing this if we hope to close the racial and socio-economic achievement gap. Part of that is being able to articulate why diversity is important at all levels of your organization.

Boards that are committed to truly diversifying their membership should consider reading *Reinventing Diversity: Transforming Organizational Community to Strengthen People, Purpose, and Performance* by Howard Ross and Julianne Malveaux as well as Howard Ross' newest book, *Everyday Bias: Identifying and Navigating Unconscious Judgments in Our Daily Lives*, which provides not only the rationale for why diversity is important but will also help you and your board develop a toolkit for discussions and action.

Some charter schools are already leading the way. E.L. Haynes Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., is doing work on diversity and inclusion in its Professional Learning Communities-inspired former middle school principal Michelle Molitor to found FREE (Fellowship for Race and Equity in Education). The school built FREE in response to the urgency for culturally-responsive systemic change for our most vulnerable students—not just in Washington, D.C., but nationwide. FREE has the mission of creating equitable educational settings for all students through honest and open dialogue across differences, and collective anti-racist action.

2. Mine current board members' networks.

At its core, board building is development work. Your school's development team should include someone skilled at individual donor prospect research for fundraising. If this person is not in place yet, consider hiring a consultant who knows how to use Wealth Engine, Muckety, and other industry research tools. This person should do prospecting of all board members and present an individualized relationship map to each board member. Often, people are unaware of the connections within their own network. Personal networks are the low-hanging fruit of board recruiting.

² Is there a payoff from top-team diversity? Thomas Barta, Markus Kleiner, and Tilo Neumann. McKinsey Quarterly. April 2012. http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/organization/is_there_a_payoff_from_top-team_diversity. The Secret of Top Performing Companies: More Women On The Board. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidprosser/2014/09/25/the-secret-of-top-performing-companies-more-women-on-the-board/>.

3. Get LinkedIn savvy.

LinkedIn Board Member Connect allows non-profit organizations to post volunteer board opportunities and to search users who have indicated interest in board service. Take a tour, and research the benefits of an upgraded account like Business Premium, which provides access to advanced search options and InMail credits that allow users to send direct messages to people outside one's personal network.

4. Connect with local professional associations and organizations.

Most cities and states have local chapters of national convening organizations for professionals, people of color, and women. Do not be afraid to do cold outreach—although before you do that, comb the list of staff members and board members and check them out on LinkedIn and social media to see if you know someone in common. Many organizations, networks, affinity groups, associations, etc. are looking for opportunities for their members get involved in the community—you could be helping them achieve these goals. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but can provide you with a start:

- Accounting and Finance
 - Association for Financial Professionals
 - The Association of Accountants and Financial Professionals in Business
- Business Leaders
 - Local Chambers of Commerce
- Human Resources
 - National Human Resources Association
 - Society for Human Resource Management
- Law
 - American Bar Association
 - The National Bar Association
- Public Relations
 - Public Relations Society of America
- People of Color
 - Monster.com's list of Top 21 African American Professional Associations
 - Monster.com's list of Top 15 Hispanic/Latino Professional Associations

INTERVIEWING AND SELECTING NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Selecting new board members is one of the most important functions of a board. While there will always be room for “gut feeling,” a strategic and effective interview process is critical to help you maximize the chances that the fit between the board and the candidate is a good one. Through this process, board members get to know each candidate and his/her background, experience, skills, and personality, and the candidate gains a clear understanding of the board's needs, the role

he/she can play, and the board's expectations of its members. Best practice supports the following steps:

1. Create or review the road map.

The governance committee is responsible for developing a clear candidate interview and selection process and ensuring that all board members are familiar with the process. The governance chair or board chair should also share the process with each board candidate, so he/she is clear about the process from the beginning. While the specifics of the process will vary from board to board, CBP recommends that the interview process assign roles for the following steps:

- Initial contact
- Meeting with the school leader and school tour
- Interview with the board members
- Observation of a board meeting

Do not let busy schedules derail the process! Instead, push to carry out the interview process in as timely a manner as possible. A process that drags out for months can sap the board's enthusiasm for a candidate and drains the candidate's motivation and excitement. Maintain communication with the candidate throughout, even just to touch base and explain next steps, asking if he/she has any questions.

2. Contact the candidate.

The board's initial contact with a prospective board member makes an important first impression. The board chair or governance committee chair should reach out as soon as possible to a board candidate, introduce him/herself, thank the candidate for his/her interest in the board, explain the interview and selection process, and establish a timeframe for the whole process, including:

- How many weeks the interview process is expected to take
- When the board anticipates deciding whether or not to elect the candidate
- When the new board member's service would begin

During this initial conversation or email exchange, we recommend scheduling the school tour and the interviews; matching up people's calendars can be very challenging and can delay and drag out the whole process. We find that many excellent board candidates decide not to join boards simply because the process takes so long, and the board falls out of touch with the candidate.

3. School tour, board meeting observation, and interviews.

This is the meat of the process and should be thoughtful and methodical. Make sure everyone understands his/her role and responsibilities. We recommend sharing information about the school and the board with candidates prior to the interviews, equipping them with enough knowledge and context to answer your questions thoughtfully and ask questions of their own. Suggestions for what information to give to the candidate up front include:

- Board Member Agreement (which will spell out the expectations for a board member's commitment level)
- Board meeting schedule for the year

- Committee meeting schedules, if possible
- Policy governing financial contributions to the school
- Board manual
- Board bylaws

School Leader meeting/school tour: It is critical that the school leader and each serious candidate meet. Every potential board member should feel a connection to the leader and have the chance to ask him/her questions about the school, its mission, and his/her goals and vision. Likewise, the school leader should have an opportunity to share feedback and insights about each candidate with the governance committee. Consider combining this meeting with a tour of the school, which is typically hosted by the school leader. The tour should include:

- Reviewing the school's history (including recent successes and hurdles), mission, programs, etc.
- Seeing the facilities and walking the halls
- Observing teaching and visiting classrooms
- Getting a sense of the student population and school culture

Board meeting observation: Observing a board meeting in person gives a candidate a clear picture of board service and can offer additional insight to the governance committee by seeking feedback and reflections from the candidate following the meeting.

Interviews: These interviews do not have to be lengthy, but they offer the best opportunity for all parties to gain critical insight into whether the fit between the candidate and the board is a good one. Be sure to explicitly tell each candidate what the expectations are for time and financial contributions, if any. While it should be stated in the board member agreement, being upfront about commitment levels can greatly reduce the chance of a poor match. Each serious candidate must have an opportunity to meet:

- The school leader
- The board chair
- The governance committee chair
- At least two other board members
- Committee chair of cvommittee candidate would likely serve on

Finally, every board member should have the candidate's resume, bio, and any other available background information before the interviews. Without advance planning, educating the candidate, and informing board members about the candidate, the interviews can easily be a wasted opportunity and fail to generate the kind of information and discussion that will help board members make strategic decisions about each candidate.

Suggested interview questions:

- Why are you interested in serving on a charter school board?

- Have you served on other boards before? If so, what are a few aspects of your board service that were notably either positive or negative for you?
- Why does this particular school board appeal to you?
- What skills, networks, experiences, and other assets will you bring to this board? How will this school benefit from your participation on the board?
- Can you meet the requirements stated in our Board Member Agreement? In particular, how much time do you anticipate being able to devote to board service?
- Do you have any initial preference in terms of committee participation?
- Are you willing to make a financial commitment to the school that is personally meaningful to you? We ask our members to make the school a personal philanthropic priority.
- What questions do you have about this board, our expectations for board members, or anything else regarding becoming a member of this board?

It is helpful for all board members who interview the candidate to take notes using a rubric based on the interview questions. This allows the governance committee to easily collect and consolidate the feedback from all the interviewers, ultimately facilitating an informed discussion and comparison of impressions of the candidate.

4. To join or not to join.

Once a candidate completes all these steps, the governance committee needs to prepare a recommendation for the full board about whether to elect him or her to the board. Boards should always consult their bylaws for any rules regarding this process and follow those rules accordingly. We recommend the following steps:

Discuss: The governance committee meets as soon as possible after all interviews are complete to discuss each candidate in depth, including the school leader in the discussions to the extent possible and desired.

Decide: The governance committee decides which candidate to present to the full board. The committee should release its recommendation at least one week prior to a board meeting to allow board members time to review and ask questions.

Vote: The board needs to discuss each candidate the governance committee recommends and take a formal vote on each one. It is important for the board to vote on each candidate separately—not as a group—and record the votes by candidate.

Strategize: Once the board votes to elect a new member, consider the best representative to invite the candidate to join the board the position. Choose a board member with a personal connection, other friends of the school, or the school leader, whoever might best encourage the candidate to accept the offer to join the board.

Notify: Immediately after the vote, let each candidate know the decision as follows.

- Candidates elected to the board:
 - Consider who should contact a candidate to ask him/her to join the board.

- The designated person contacts the elected candidate to officially ask him/her to join the board, offering congratulations and welcome.
- Provide key dates at this time: upcoming board meetings, an upcoming retreat, significant school events, etc.
- Explain the onboarding process.
- Candidates not elected to the board:
 - Consider candidate for other opportunities at school or with the board (for example, could the person join a board committee?).
 - Consider who should contact the candidate; this is most likely the governance committee chair. Thank him/her for interest in the board, indicate that there were a number of compelling candidates, and, as appropriate, ask if you can stay in touch in the event of future board openings.

Onboard: The governance committee is responsible for selecting and, with the school leader, onboarding new members. They must capitalize on this important opportunity to cultivate and fully utilize new members, strategically engaging them in the work of the board. A strategic onboarding process achieves the following:

- Educates board members on the mission, history, results, successes, and challenges of the school and its board
- Motivates and inspires new members to fully commit to being active and productive
- Identifies specific ways each board member can positively impact the board and school
- Shares the norms, policies, and practices of the board

ONBOARDING

Onboarding is the process of orienting newly-selected members to the board with the end goal that every new board member feels engaged, ready to effectively contribute his/her skills, and rewarded by the board experience. Boards that underestimate the importance of onboarding new members end up with new members who are often confused about what their role entails, how they fit into the work, and how they can make an impact. The board's governance committee is responsible for selecting and onboarding new members (ideally involving the school leader).

A strategic onboarding process achieves the following:

- Educates new board members on the mission, history, results, successes, and challenges of the school and its board
- Motivates and inspires new members to fully commit to being active and productive
- Identifies specific ways each board member can have a positive impact on the board and school
- Shares the norms, policies, and practices of the board

Every onboarding process should have an Orientation Training, and each new member should receive a Board of Directors Manual.

ORIENTATION TRAINING

The governance committee typically plans and executes orientation for new board members immediately after the individual is voted onto the board. This orientation gives new board members information they need to be successful and provides the opportunity to begin relationships with other board members, a critical feature of highly effective boards.

There are many ways to orient new board members (for example, a session during the school day that combines board discussion with classroom visits; a dinner at a board member's home or local restaurant; or a downtown lunch that includes onboarding objectives).

When developing the agenda for board orientation, poll current board members and ask, "What do you know now that wish you had known when you first joined the board?" Use the responses as a guide for your agenda.

A sample onboarding training session could include:

- **Introductions and time for socializing:** Take time to introduce those around the table and provide name cards so new members can quickly learn names. Each current board member can share his/her own length of board service, and his/her personal story (interest in education, professional interests, etc.) including how he/she came to serve on the board.
- **Overview of the mission, vision, and educational goals of the charter school:** The school leader should talk about the school's founding, programs, and success; students and families; and key stakeholders.
- **Responsibilities of board members and committees:** Clearly state the board's policy on attendance at meetings, whether attending by phone/video is permitted or discouraged, and requirements for board member committee participation.
- **Long-term school goals, organizational priorities, and strategic plans:** Include background information on key recent board decisions and those on the horizon.
- **Finances and fundraising:** Be explicit about the overall financial situation of the school and fundraising expectations, including whether the board has a "give/get" policy, requiring board members to either contribute or fundraise a specified amount of money, or expectations for each board member to give at a personally meaningful level.
- **Cultural aspects of the board:** Discuss logistics for meetings (e.g., attire, whether food is provided), behavioral norms, and expected responsiveness to email communication.
- **Data collection:** Orientation is a good time to make sure you have all contact information for new and current members and availability for meetings.
- **Compliance:** Forms and documents that may need to be completed and submitted to the school's authorizer

BOARD MENTOR

Assign each new board member a mentor or "buddy" who has served on the board long enough to offer support. This person can be the first point of contact to answer questions after orientation and can help the new member navigate any issues that may arise. Assigning this role to a different

board member for each new board member reduces the burden on the board and governance chairs, helps build relationships across the board, and highlights the importance of onboarding new members.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MANUAL

The Board of Directors manual gives new board members the critical documents they need to build their knowledge of the school and familiarity with the board. It does not matter whether the manual is printed in a binder or loaded into a password-protected online board portal, as long as there is one place where board members can have access to all relevant documents and materials at any time. This manual should serve as the backbone for all orientation trainings, the archive for all critical documents, and a recruiting tool for future board members.

The governance committee must keep this manual and all board documentation current for both compliance and convenience. It is immensely helpful for busy board members to have one place to find all board materials and information that is clearly organized and up to date. Charter school boards are often surprised when the authorizer, funder, etc. requests certain materials (e.g., minutes, contracts, records), and collecting these documents retroactively is time-consuming and likely frustrating (not to mention out of compliance). The governance committee chair should provide each new board member with the board manual a week before orientation begins to serve as the foundation for onboarding. The manual should include:

BOARD MEMBERS

- Names, contact information, offices held (treasurer, secretary, etc.), term lengths, and short bios for each current board member
- Contact information and short bio for the school leader
- Lists of committees and the chair for each, including contact information for any non-board members

CALENDAR

- Board and committee meetings
- School events board members can or should attend such as performances, demonstrations, or portfolio evaluations
- Key dates and milestones of all board and committee goals

JOB DESCRIPTIONS

- The full board
- Officers
- Individual board members
- Committees
- School leader and leadership team

SCHOOL INFORMATION

- School charter
- Mission, vision, and values
- Short history of the school—how, why, and when it was founded; results to date; and any events of significance
- Short description of the school’s program
- Description of the students served: demographic information on poverty and English Language Learners; residential information; and other descriptive information about the student population
- Summary of student performance data: high-stakes test scores over the last several years, authorizer performance reports/ratings, relevant academic reports to the board
- School’s strategic plan
- Organizational chart
- Most recent annual report
- News articles about the school, the city’s and state’s charter sector, and relevant political events

FINANCE AND FUNDRAISING INFORMATION

- Financial reports, including most current and previous six months
- Most recent independent audit report
- Budget for the current year and previous one to three years
- Long-range financial plan
- Names and contact information for current funders

MANAGEMENT DOCUMENTS

- Documents that detail relationship with a charter management organization (CMO) or education management organization (EMO), if your school contracts with one
- Contracts, reports, milestones, and any other documents relevant to the CMO/EMO or significant outside vendors

LEGAL AND POLICY DOCUMENTS

- Articles of incorporation, bylaws, policies (conflict of interest, confidentiality, student discipline, etc.), and Internal Revenue Service Form 990: Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax

- All legally required documents including meeting minutes³
- Insurance information that includes a copy of the school's certificate for the Directors' and Officers' Liability insurance

GOVERNANCE RESOURCES

- BoardSource provides myriad resources to support boards in reaching the standards that you can keep in your manual for reference

Onboarding is an essential part of cultivating a truly effective board. By taking the time to develop a comprehensive manual, thoughtfully design a training process, and purposefully match newcomers with mentors, you are setting your board up for success. Boards function most effectively when everyone feels prepared and inspired to contribute in ways that are meaningful and fulfilling.

II. BOARD LEADERSHIP

Great boards need great board chairs. Being a board chair is an important leadership position that offers the opportunity to make a difference for children. This section offers top tips for new (and veteran) board chairs on understanding the role and leading effectively.

BOARD CHAIR DESCRIPTION

Every great board must have a strong, well-trained board chair. The board chair assumes responsibility for the overall functioning of the board. He/she facilitates board meetings, oversees the work of the committees, and works most closely with the school leader. Often, the board chair also has special authority (e.g., sign checks, approve contracts, etc.) and is the point of contact for the school's authorizer.

The board chair also plays an extremely important role on the interpersonal side of the board. He/she must be responsive to other board members' views, maintain a collegial atmosphere, manage different personalities and perspectives, and work hard to foster a trusting yet candid relationship with the school leader. Ultimately, the board chair must monitor and nurture positive dynamics by creating an environment in which board members feel engaged, included, respected, and able to make a positive contribution.

Overarching Duties

- Ensures the board is functioning effectively and meeting high standards for effective governance
- Holds the board accountable for executing key board functions
- Facilitates all meetings of the board and other meetings or events as necessary

³ We recommend including minutes from the previous six meetings.

- Develops board meeting agendas in partnership with the school leader that reflect the school's and board's priorities, drive strategic conversation and decision making, and keep the board's work focused on the goals
- Makes sure that the board conducts a self-assessment each year and addresses areas for improvement
- Leads the discussion on planning board retreats

Committee Work

- Sets clear expectations for committee operations and communication with the board
- Holds committees accountable for achieving their annual goals
- Consistent with any relevant rules in a board's bylaws, the board chair appoints committee and task force chairs, and assigns members to committees

School Leader Relationship

- Builds a constructive, candid relationship with the school leader
- Participates in regularly scheduled check-ins with the school leader to discuss strategic issues, monitor progress toward goals, and identify opportunities where he/she needs support from the board
- Guides the board through the process of hiring, evaluating, and supporting the school leader

Compliance

- Serves as the main point of contact with the authorizer
- Ensures all board actions and board members meet and understand legal and ethical compliance standards
- Shares all relevant information from the authorizer with the full board

Leadership Skills

- Models effective networking with community members and stakeholders by serving as the board's ambassador
- Champions diversity and inclusion on the board
- Supports and recognizes board members who make positive contributions to the board
- Takes the lead in removing board members who are persistently disruptive or disengaged

Communication

- Respects and engages every board member while encouraging an open and constructive line of communication
- Is approachable, available, and responsive

- Makes sure that each board member has a clear role to play on the board
- Listens and communicates well, including being available for conversations after hours and on weekends when necessary

TOP 10 TIPS FOR BEING A GREAT BOARD CHAIR

Here are 10 great tips to help the board chair be his/her best:

1. Take on this role knowing that it is hard.

Being a board chair is intellectually challenging, takes a lot of time, and requires strategic thinking. It also has huge benefits in terms of personal and external impact. Be ready to play the role well.

2. Get to know your fellow board members well.

Leading a board is about managing a team. Learn your individual board members' skill sets, personalities, and optimal working conditions. Find how to bring out the best in your colleagues so you may leverage their leadership most effectively.

3. Spread the work.

Remember, you have a full board of amazing leaders to rely on. Maximize your team.

4. Strategically assign members to committees.

Be thoughtful about who you ask to serve on each committee. Keep board member committee preferences in mind but build the committee structure in ways that maximize individual talents. Use your observations of individuals' strengths and the committees' needs to make the most advantageous appointments. If a board member absolutely does not want to be on or chair a particular committee, listen to that; you don't want a disengaged committee member.

5. Make sure each board member is engaged and hold them accountable.

Engagement begins with individual board members having key roles to play in the board achieving its goals. For example, if a great real estate attorney just joined your board as a finance committee member, be explicit with the role you need her to play in securing the new school building. People do their best work and feel most invested when they have clear direction and expectations.

Check in regularly with committee chairs and members to ensure all board members are delivering on their commitments. When board members fail to meet assigned commitments, have conversations with these members to identify barriers and solutions for moving forward. If members are unable to fulfill their role, then the board chair must take leadership in addressing this problem.

6. Don't overreact.

Unexpected things happen all the time in schools. Consider all points of view and options before you jump to conclusions. Make sure you always take the time to see the full picture.

7. Be a great facilitator.

Make sure all board members are heard. Ideally, all board members speak at least once during each meeting. Do not let the conversation veer off the agenda or drag on beyond the allotted time.

8. Get into the school and bring other board members with you.

Model the importance of visiting the school outside of board meetings. Go to plays, portfolio presentations, community meetings, and back-to-school night. Board members must know the school, families, and the students they serve. Remember, when visiting the school, you are always representing the board. Be careful not to overstep that role.

9. Value your regular check-ins with the school leader.

Make sure you are giving ongoing feedback and support and understand the differences between oversight and management. You will end up knowing more about the day-to-day happenings in the school than your board colleagues—take the time to update them on important events (i.e., compliance citations) before or at the next board meeting.

Start the check-in with something positive, perhaps asking the school leader to tell you something great that happened at school this week. Ask what problems at the school worry your school leader most. Also, always ask the school leader how he/she is doing as an individual—this is a job with high burn out. Make sure you are sending the message to the school leader that you care about him or her as a professional and as an individual.

10. Know that retreats are critical.

Boards need time away from the regular work. Retreats help the board focus on long-term strategy, encourage innovation and group motivation, and strengthen relationships that improve team effectiveness. As chair, make sure that the retreats not only happen, but also are effective.

THE FIRST 30 DAYS AS BOARD CHAIR

Perhaps the most important thing you can do to start off well in your new role is to build a shared vision for your partnership with the school leader. CBP recommends spending a fair amount of time together, in person, in your first 30 days as chair. These conversations should set the tone you would like to characterize your relationship.

Start off your term by setting up a one-hour, in-person meeting with the school leader where you both candidly discuss the best ways to work together.

- Ask the school leader what he/she needs from you as the chair
- Ask what worked well and did not work well with previous chairs
- Share your thoughts about how you plan to approach your role
- Talk together about what kind of relationship you want (trusting, transparent, candid, responsive, etc.).

Decide on Norms

During your first 30 days, you and the school leader will want to address the following topics:

- Communication
 - Email guidelines (e.g., when to copy the board chair; whether both parties prefer many shorter emails each day/week or one long comprehensive email per day/week)

- Phone call guidelines (e.g., when evening and weekend calls are appropriate; what times of the day are mutually preferable)
- Responsiveness norms (e.g., the school leader and chair respond to each other within 48 hours, 24 hours, weekly, etc.)
- Formal weekly check-ins
 - Weekly check-ins are not optional. Choose a time and consider that time protected on your calendar, much as you would protect a weekly staff meeting or check-ins with your direct reports at work.
 - Check-ins should be structured and focused conversations. Each check-in should have an agenda; we recommend using a running list of topics that both you and the school leader can update (briefly) before the check-in.
 - The agenda should generally be structured around the school leader's and board's goals for the year, to keep the conversations substantive and targeted, with room each week for new business, pressing issues, or unexpected issues. Agree on a consistent format; for example, it could mirror the school leader's report structure (updates, items for discussion, items for action).
 - Each quarter, devote the whole check-in to a more formal discussion of progress toward goals.
 - Especially in the first few months, regularly discuss the value of the check-ins to both the board chair and the school leader. If either feels they are not a benefit to their role, decide together how to bolster their value; do NOT cancel or start to skip the check-ins.
- Process for putting together and disseminating board materials
 - Develop a process for creating strategic board meeting agendas.
 - Discuss who bears primary responsibility for compiling board materials from committee chairs, key school staff members, etc.
 - Identify the best way to get materials to board members (e.g., online portal, email, hard copy).

Cultivate Relationships with Fellow Board Members and the School Leader

Tips for building strong relationships that will form the foundation of a cohesive and highly functioning board include:

- Instead of doing your school leader check-in on the phone every week, offer to bring lunch to the school and meet in person occasionally.
- Schedule coffee or lunch with each board member individually during your first three months as chair to get to know more about their interests, skills, feedback, and goals for their board service.
- Schedule a board social event at least once a year to help the board come together as a group.

Review and Understand Key Information About Your Charter School and Board

Charter school board chairs need key information to perform their duties. Be sure you have read the following:

- School information
 - The school's charter agreement and goals laid out in the charter
 - Student academic performance data
 - Crisis management procedures and communication
 - Trends in enrollment and parent satisfaction
 - The school's financial position
- Compliance topics
 - Bylaws and policies
 - Authorizer and funder reporting requirements
 - Any lawsuits, employee complaints, or authorizer warnings
- Board calendar of events and key milestones

Engage Key Stakeholders as Appropriate

With your school leader, discuss the most effective way to reach out to:

- Parents association representatives
 - The board plays a very different role from the parents' association, and it is important for both groups to understand each other's goals and priorities.
- Teachers and staff
 - The board does not manage staff beyond the school leader and must respect that line between oversight and management. However, the board does ensure the conditions that support teacher and staff success are in place. Brainstorm with your school leader about the best way to help the staff understand the board's role and show that the board supports and appreciates them. For example, throw a staff back-to-school breakfast sponsored and attended by the board, and tell them how grateful you are for their hard work.
- Donors
 - Collaborate with the school leader to determine how you might be most helpful in stewarding donors.

Request Knowledge Transfer from the Outgoing Chair

Ask the outgoing board chair for any advice, insight, and support he or she may have to offer. Note that while your leadership style or approach may vary from the outgoing chair's, the board may benefit from this shift. Do not just try to emulate your predecessor. Specifically, you might ask the outgoing board chair:

- What went well and what went poorly in the partnership with the school leader last term
- What he/she feels is worth continuing and what should change going forward
- Whether he/she is willing to meet should questions arise for you as the new board chair

Use Data from Your Board's Self-Evaluation to Lead Towards Best Governance Practices

All boards should complete a self-assessment to measure how they are performing against a set of high standards; CBP uses Standards for Effective Charter School Governance, highlighted on the National Charter School Resource Center website. If your board has completed this analysis, review this data at the beginning of your term to have a strong sense of your board's effectiveness, successes, and key challenges. Knowing this, you can guide the board toward ongoing improvement. If your board has not yet completed an annual self-evaluation, administer one immediately to provide you and the board with the data you need to progress in the coming year.

III. COMMITTEES AND COMMITTEE LEADERSHIP

Committees are the workhorses of the board. Each board member needs to clearly understand the purpose of the committee(s) they serve on. We include charges for six common charter board committees: development, executive, finance, governance, school performance, and strategic planning. Each board's needs may necessitate the creation of a new committee, for example, facilities if the school is moving or renovating—just be sure to outline expectations in writing. Each committee should have a chairperson to lead it and minutes should be kept for all committee meetings.

DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

The development committee⁴ drives the board's vital fundraising activities. Members of this committee work closely with administrators to engage the board in regular and effective fundraising activities for the school. The school leader, the director of development (where applicable), and at least three board members—one of whom serves as the committee chair—comprise the development committee. The committee meets at least once between every board meeting and submits committee minutes to the full board to communicate progress.

The development committee holds itself accountable for the following:

- Setting goals
 - Recommends organizational fundraising goals for the charter school to ensure short- and long-term sustainability and success
 - Identifies its own committee goals to track the committee's progress over time
- Leading the board's culture of gift cultivation
 - Establishes the board-giving policy

⁴ Boards should decide whether to have a development committee or a development and external affairs committee. This document is applicable to either committee.

- Develops policies for the board and school leadership regarding gift solicitation and recognition
- Crafts a compelling and accurate case for support ⁵
- Motivating individual board members to get involved in the development and acquisition of gifts
 - Leads by example
 - Arranges fundraising training for the board as needed
 - Reinforces the commitment of every board member to contribute within his or her means
- Ensuring the board reaches its fundraising goals
 - Monitors progress toward annual fulfillment of fundraising goals
 - Shares the case for support and specific fundraising projects during board meetings
 - Partners with school leadership to make sure the board is aware of the school's specific fundraising needs
- Raising awareness for the school
 - Leverages the board to attend key community, school social, and political events
 - Speaks highly of the school outside of the board meeting, cultivating new donors and champions

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

An executive committee can be empowered to act on behalf of the board on urgent issues in between board meetings. BoardSource, a national organization working to strengthen non-profit board leadership, points out the key distinction of executive committees is that “unlike other standing committees, the Executive Committee speaks to the board as well as for the board.”⁶ The executive committee typically includes the board chair, all other officers, and the school leader playing the same role as he/she does on the full board (either ex officio or voting member). The committee meets only as needed and can meet in executive session without the school leader when it so chooses (e.g., when his or her evaluation is being addressed). Only executive committee members and invited guests may attend executive committee meetings.⁷

Informing the Rest of the Board

Minutes of executive committee meetings are shared promptly with the board to ensure transparency and keep the other board members well informed. If the executive committee makes significant decisions, all board members should be informed within 24 hours, and the full board must ratify the decision at its next meeting. Depending on a state’s open meeting law, technology

⁵ The case of support is used in the fundraising world to describe a written statement that answers the question, “Why does your charter school need and desire philanthropic support?”

⁶ Andringa, Robert C. *The Nonprofit Board Answer Book: A Practical Guide for Board Members and Chief Executives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007. 62. Print.

⁷ Check local open meeting laws to ensure your executive committee stays in compliance.

can make it easier for boards to “meet” in non-scheduled situations and electronic voting can eliminate the need for the executive committee to take action without first consulting the full board. Be sure to consult your state’s guidelines since some have strict rules about technology and board meetings.

Use Sparingly

Be aware of how this committee can become an inclusive entity.⁸ Executive committees risk becoming a “mini board” when too many board-related conversations are limited to the executive committee and the rest of the board is not fully leveraged.

Outline Authority

Bylaws should clearly articulate what this committee can and cannot do. For example, most bylaws state that executive committees do not have the authority to take key actions such as dissolving the charter school, hiring or firing the school leader, amending the bylaws, changing the budget, or electing board members.

Keep in mind that Executive Committees can serve a beneficial and proactive role on the board. For example, they can:

- Act as a mini-think tank for the board by identifying key strategic issues and the best way to frame them for board discussion
- Actively develop new leadership on the board
- Model best governance practices for the rest of the board

FINANCE COMMITTEE

The finance committee oversees the school’s budget and asset management. This committee approves short- and long-term financial goals for the charter school, recommends and monitors a budget aligned with the school’s strategic priorities, ensures compliance with official policies, and raises financial concerns and solutions to safeguard the school’s resources. The finance committee includes the school leader, Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and at least three board members—one of whom serves as the committee chair. The committee meets at least once between every board meeting and submits committee minutes to the full board to communicate progress.

The finance committee holds itself accountable for the following:

- Recommending a budget aligned to the school’s strategic priorities
 - Works with the school leader and CFO to prepare and recommend an annual budget for the board’s consideration and approval
 - Ensures the annual budget is prepared in a timely manner
- Overseeing the school’s financial resources
 - Reviews financial statements regularly to monitor progress throughout the year, and suggests adjustments as required

⁸ Just like other committees, the executive committee reports to the board.

- Identifies short- and long-term financial challenges before they become urgent issues
 - Serves as an ongoing resource and advisor to staff on financial issues
- Providing training or onboarding to ensure all board members understand the school's finances
- Driving progress toward financial goals
 - Sets short- and long-term fiscal goals to ensure school sustainability and success
 - Sets annual committee goals and regularly monitors progress
- Ensuring financial compliance⁹
 - Confirms appropriate financial policies and procedures are in place and followed
 - Recommends the selection of an auditor¹⁰
 - Meets with the auditor before the board's audit review and approval
- Identifying actions needed to resolve complex financial issues
 - Determines whether the complexity or scale of financial operations requires the committee to split into two separate board committees: finance committee and audit committee
 - Recommends the creation of an investment committee¹¹ when appropriate

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

In some ways, the governance committee is the most influential committee on the board as it is responsible for maintaining proper board composition and ensuring that the board governs effectively. This committee drives a comprehensive board self-assessment process, fosters the development of new and existing board members, manages board member recruitment, and nominates candidates for officer positions. The governance committee includes the board chair and at least three other board members, one of whom serves as the committee chair.¹² The school leader or another staff member also often serves on this committee. This committee meets at least once between every board meeting and submits committee minutes to the full board to communicate progress.

The governance committee holds itself accountable for the following:

- Monitoring and maintaining board-wide adherence to governance best practices
 - Conducts a board self-assessment every one to two years

⁹ Some boards ask the finance committee to oversee all charter school compliance, including authorizer reporting requirements, etc. Other boards assign this role to the executive committee.

¹⁰ The committee should make sure its school changes auditors (or audit partners) approximately every five years.

¹¹ An investment committee manages the school's investment portfolio and determines the level of risk desired (high or low) for investments.

¹² Certain requirements may vary by state; review your state's laws to be certain you are in compliance.

- Assesses the school's governance needs by periodically reviewing the board's size, strategic composition, and committee structure; and recommends changes as needed¹³
- In partnership with the school leader and board chair, creates an annual board calendar for approval by the full board
- Reviews and recommends changes to bylaws and board policies every two years
- Articulates the responsibilities of individual board members by creating a board member agreement that is signed annually by each board member
- Monitors board member performance in relation to the board member agreement, and supports the board chair in ensuring all members uphold their board commitments
- Onboarding and training new and existing board members
 - Orients members to school and board policies, practices, and responsibilities
 - Provides ongoing governance training and support
 - Creates opportunities for board members to build relationships and interact socially
- Guaranteeing steady board leadership
 - Identifies, cultivates, and nominates new board members to build a strategically composed board
 - Recruits for demographic and skill diversity among board members, including diversity of race, gender, age, skill set, perspective, and experience
 - Maintains an officer succession plan that grooms high-performing board members to serve as chair, vice chair, secretary, and treasurer (or finance committee chair)
 - Tracks term expirations and maintains a succession plan for board vacancies
 - Recruits non-board members to committees to add value and potentially serve as future board members¹⁴
- Setting goals
 - Supports the board chair in designing and executing an annual board goal-setting process
 - Identifies governance committee goals to track committee progress

SCHOOL PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE

Although the school leader is responsible for the school community (students, parents, and staff), the board hires and oversees the school leader to make sure that students excel. The school exists to provide great educational experiences and outcomes for students, and the school performance committee leads the board in upholding this duty. Through appropriate board oversight, the school

¹³ Ask whether your board has the right skills and all of the committees needed. Review your bylaws for committee requirements.

¹⁴ Check local regulations about non-voting committee members.

performance committee monitors student performance against rigorous academic goals and raises strategic issues for board discussion. The school performance committee must include the school leader and at least three board members, one of whom will serve as the committee chair.¹⁵ The committee meets at least once between every board meeting and provides committee minutes to the full board to communicate progress.

It is important to note that this is a committee that can easily overstep its bounds from oversight to management. The board's role is to ask the questions, provide advice, and hold the school leader accountable for results. The board does not make program-level decisions.

The school performance committee holds itself accountable for the following:

- Partnering with the school leader to set and reach rigorous academic goals
 - Defines excellent school performance based on the charter school's mission and vision
 - Supports school leader in developing annual academic performance goals for the school, and recommends these academic goals to the board for approval
 - Verifies that school administrators are using student performance data to constructively inform decisions
 - Monitors the school leader's efforts to improve areas of subpar student performance¹⁶
 - Upon request, serves as an ongoing resource to administrators for academic issues and programming
- Building board-wide understanding of the school's academic performance and progress toward goals
 - Supports the school leadership in developing and presenting academic dashboards that measure progress towards annual academic goals
 - Updates the board, in partnership with the school leader, on performance data and factors currently impacting student achievement
 - Identifies challenges to the academic program before they become urgent issues
 - Evaluates the school's student achievement against neighboring schools and national standards¹⁷
 - Attends authorizer trainings on academic accountability
 - Delivers onboarding and supplemental trainings to foster a working knowledge of student performance data and measurements among all board members

¹⁵ In schools that have a leadership structure, including a school leader and principals, the committee may choose to add the principals as committee members as well.

¹⁶ For example, if a school showed low test scores in math, the board should ask the school leader tough questions about why this occurred and what he/she will do to address it. The board should not tell the school leader what he/she should do about that result (e.g., suggesting a specific math curriculum or teaching strategy).

¹⁷ Committee members may visit other high-performing schools in the area to learn best practices that inform their work.

- Setting committee goals and maintaining a strong committee membership
 - Identifies committee goals to track academic committee progress
 - Recruits non-board members—if charter school bylaws allow—with educational expertise relative to the school’s model to advise the committee

STRATEGIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

The strategic planning committee is responsible for partnering with the school leader to write, review, and propose changes to the school’s long-term strategic plan.¹⁸ The committee includes the school leader and at least three other board members, one of whom will serve as the committee chair.¹⁹

The strategic planning committee holds itself accountable for the following:

- Partnering with the school leader to determine the process for creating, reviewing, and updating the strategic plan
 - This includes a clear articulation of roles, decision-making authority, and responsibilities (e.g., board, school leadership, consultant)
- Making a recommendation to the board on whether to hire an outside consultant to facilitate the strategic planning process
- Creating a timeline for the strategic planning process, and holding all parties accountable for meeting deadlines
- Overseeing the completion of a clear, actionable, and concise strategic plan
- Monitoring key organizational, community, and market trends to minimize risk, and maximize opportunity to achieve goals outlined in the strategic plan
- Creating a dashboard that clearly tracks progress toward goals in strategic plan
- Evaluating the strategic planning committee’s effectiveness, and documenting suggested improvements to the process for the board to consider in future years

IV. BOARD OFFICERS

Every charter school board should have a full slate of officers at all times to maintain consistent leadership and clarity of roles. Charter school boards can use the familiar board officer structure—board chair, vice chair, treasurer, and secretary—that most nonprofits use. The board chair leads the officer team. The process for selecting and installing officers should be contained in your board’s bylaws. Having thoughtful job descriptions for every officer helps set high expectations and

¹⁸ Note that each board should designate whether the strategic planning committee is a standing committee (meaning its purpose is to address long-term, ongoing, and primary activities of the board) or an ad hoc committee that addresses more short-term assignments that have a finite end. For most boards, it is common to establish this group as an ad hoc committee that stops meeting regularly upon completion of the planning process.

¹⁹ Consider including members from multiple committees.

ensures that the board selects people with the right characteristics, experience, and expertise for the roles. Read on for officer basics.

SECRETARY

Overall, the secretary is responsible for ensuring that accurate documentation exists to meet legal requirements and for the authorizer “to determine when, how, and by whom the board's business was conducted.”²⁰

Responsibilities

The secretary supports the board’s organizational needs so that the board can achieve its goals and operates in accordance with its bylaws in the following areas:

- Keeps accurate minutes for each board meeting
- Shares minutes with the board in a timely fashion
- Ensures that minutes are approved by the board in a recorded vote
- Makes sure the board adheres to open meeting laws and other legal requirements
- Assumes responsibilities of the chair in the absence of the board chair and vice chair
- Provides notice of board and committee meetings to all board members (we recommend using calendar invites as well as emails and reminders)
- Keeps all legal and official documents up-to-date
- Maintains the board's records and archives for future reference by board members, the authorizer, and others

TREASURER

The treasurer of a charter school board oversees all matters related to the school’s finances, property, and budget. CBP often uses the terms treasurer and finance committee chair interchangeably—board members who serve as treasurer typically chair the finance committee, although not always. Ideally, the treasurer has a strong working relationship with the school leader as well as the school’s CFO. He or she also oversees the school’s leadership in the areas of money management and compliance.

Responsibilities

A charter school board treasurer directs the board’s financial work so that the board can achieve its goals and operates in accordance with its bylaws in the following areas:

- Leadership
 - Serves as the chair of the finance committee, and leads the committee in setting and meeting annual goals

²⁰ “Secretary of the Board of Treasurers Job Description.” Nathan Garber & Associates. Garber, Nathan, et. al. Web. 2014.

- Ensures that all members of the board fully comprehend the financial matters of the school and receive reliable and timely information regarding those matters
- Works with the finance committee, school leader, and CFO in leading the development of an annual school budget and presenting the budget to the full board for approval
- Accounting & Reports
 - Understands financial accounting for nonprofit organizations or charter schools
 - Works with the CFO or other appropriate school leadership to deliver accurate and complete financial reports to the board on a regular basis
 - Keeps all records of school accounts current
 - Oversees and reviews the annual audit process
- Ethics
 - Handles all work related to the school's financial affairs with integrity and care
 - Remains apprised of legal and ethical requirements for the position

VICE CHAIR

The vice chair of a board is essentially the board chair's understudy and second in command. In the event that the board chair is absent, temporarily unable to perform his/her responsibilities, or permanently unable to continue in the position, the vice chair acts as the board chair. Under normal circumstances, the vice chair assists with the overall functioning of the board and serves as an advisor and deputy to the chair. An active and engaged vice chair with clear roles and responsibilities can be a tremendous asset to a charter school board, as he/she can share the workload that typically falls solely on the chair's shoulders (a hardship that frustrates recruiting a strong board chair).

On some boards, the position of vice chair is a chair-elect position, which means that after serving for one or two years, the vice chair automatically moves into the chair role. Because this process is not uniform across all boards, the bylaws should clearly outline the process for board chair succession.

Responsibilities

The vice chair helps the board chair lead the full charter school board to achieve its goals and operate in accordance with its bylaws. The vice chair also:

- Executes specific projects at the request of the board chair²¹
- Helps the board chair develop and implement officer transition or succession plans
- Understands the responsibilities and duties of the board chair, and is ready and prepared to stand in for the board chair as needed
- Actively recruits new board members, and helps to retain current board members

²¹ This could mean chairing an ad hoc committee, providing extra support to a flagging committee, monitoring committees' progress toward their goals, and/or leading the process for the evaluation of the school leader.

- Provides leadership and direction to the board in concert with the board chair
- Ensures transparent communication between all board members