



Charter School Governing Board Primer

School Leadership





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.

Prepared By:



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.

Authors

Charter Board Partners

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the individuals involved in the production of this report: Stefan Huh and Soumya Sathya of the U.S. Department of Education for guidance and feedback; Mukta Pandit for her leadership as Project Director; and Safal Partners staff for editing and design.

This toolkit was produced under U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-OII-13-C-0065 with Safal Partners, Inc. Sarah Zevin served as the contracting officer's representative. The content of the publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. This toolkit is in the public domain. While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, it should be cited as:

Charter Board Partners. (2018). Charter School Governing Board Primer: School Leadership.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Selecting Your School Leader

Creating an Effective School Leader Job Description

School Leader Succession Planning

What is a Succession Plan?

II. Governance Vs. Management

The Difference Between Governance and Management

A Framework for Governance and Management

The Gray Areas

The Line Can Shift

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 resource provides best practices and support designed to ensure great school leadership and an guidance in developing an effective relationship between the board and leadership.

I. SELECTING YOUR SCHOOL LEADER

The key to focusing relentlessly on academics is to have a strong school leader. The board needs to know how to effectively recruit for a great school leader while supporting him/her as well as working collaboratively. To do this, boards need a relevant job description tied to strategic needs and an up-to-date succession plan.

Creating an Effective School Leader Job Description

Charter school boards need to recognize the importance of school leader job descriptions and invest the time and thought required to create a description that can serve as a key tool in the board's most important hiring decision. Board members need to reach consensus on their vision for a school leader. This means that even for schools with an existing school leader job description, refreshing the description annually is a priority. In this sense, an effective update of the school leader job description is a forcing function for a broader process that includes three key steps.

1. Reflect

The first step toward gaining consensus on the vision for the next leader's profile is to launch an exercise in honest reflection about the state of the school and the profile of the leader needed to create the desired future of the school. Effective boards consider what is needed from the school leader in the next chapter of the school's evolution.

- What is the next set of challenges for the school?
- What set of skills is required for the future, compared to has been needed in the past?
- What other stakeholders should inform our opinion?

While the board may be in a hurry to launch a search and fill a vacancy, rushing through these complex considerations easily results in a misguided—and therefore longer—search process.

2. Deliberate

With answers to the reflection exercise at the front of their mind, board members should engage in a conversation requiring members to distinguish between the non-negotiable characteristics and skill sets the next leader must possess versus the preferred—but nonessential—attributes. Ideally, the board chair will lead this conversation, fueled by a recent strategic plan.

Note: If a strategic plan does not exist, it is likely that one would be beneficial, particularly in or near a leadership transition. A key discussion for the board—though one outside the scope of this publication—is whether to create a strategic plan before or after a new leader arrives.

The following topics may guide your board toward meaningful conversations:

- **Strategic Planning:** As noted above, ideally the board has established goals that are linked to a strategic plan and outline a clear direction for the school. Use these to identify the traits needed in a candidate to optimize the probability of achieving these goals. Consider the differences between the desired experience, skills, and personality traits you are seeking.
- **Community Engagement:** Some charter school boards solicit input from the full school staff, parents, donors, and local stakeholders, such as key contacts in the local school district. This input is not only likely to be interesting, but acquiring it builds stakeholder buy-in.

Boards should avoid the common pitfall of overemphasizing the last leader's shortcomings; this can skew the perception of what is needed in the profile of the next leader and shortchange an otherwise forward-looking process.

3. Draft

Once critical board conversations are underway, create a draft for board approval. Consider and plan for the fact that a search is a messaging opportunity for the school given that a wide range of audiences will see the job description. In that spirit, consider:

- **Branding:** Use this opportunity to introduce (or re-introduce) your school. Create a narrative that tells prospective applicants your school's mission, culture, distinguishing characteristics, past successes, and future goals. How you introduce the school can translate to a more relevant applicant pool. For example, if your school is a start-up, say so, and describe how that is driving the expectations of the next leader. This should draw candidates who have or want that type of experience.
- **Context:** If you can, explain why there is a vacancy. Informed applicants will want to know why the school needs a new leader. Is this a start-up? Is this the school's third leader in as many years? If, for example, your former school leader is transitioning into a different opportunity or relocating, this is easy enough to explain and can quell trepidation in candidates. If the reasons for the vacancy are confidential, make sure to maintain that confidentiality while being as transparent as possible.
- **Prioritization:** Carefully distinguish the non-negotiable skills, expertise, and characteristics from what is preferred in a future school leader. Ideally, the job description will indicate these priorities so that candidates can easily digest and understand the opportunity presented.
- **Sensitivity:** Consider what goes into the written job description and what would be better discussed in person. Your job description can be used to simply allude to sensitive topics.
- **Process:** Again, return to the question of important stakeholder considerations for this document. Do your bylaws require that the job description be voted on for approval by the full board? If not, minimally, we recommend that there be an opportunity for the full board

to view the final document before it becomes public so that internal questions or concerns can be addressed. It is also good practice to share the document internally, in the school, before it is shared more broadly. However, communication around that step should be clear; at this stage of the process, this would not be an invitation for editing given that this document and its related decision is the purview of the board, but more of an invitation for input and an internal courtesy.

School Leader Succession Planning

School leadership transitions are inevitable and pivotal points in a charter school's life cycle. Leaders burn out, move, and change careers. On occasion, they leave abruptly in the midst of a school year. Sometimes boards must proactively replace the leader—either for poor performance or because the fit is no longer optimal. Succession plans are critical to a board's effectiveness in leading charter schools through leadership transitions.

A survey of 400 charter school leaders found that 71 percent planned to leave their school within five years.¹ That means chances are your school leader is planning to leave in the next 60 months! Nevertheless, just half of school leaders reported that their boards have prepared school leader succession plans. Boards must prepare for this occurrence, as it will happen.

What is a Succession Plan?

Succession plans are written instructions outlining the steps a charter school will take to address a change in school leadership. These plans generally include two main components:

- **Emergency succession strategy:** Action plan used when the school leader is suddenly unable to perform his or her job.
- **Planned succession strategy:** Action plan used when boards have advance notice of the upcoming transition.

Once a plan is created, be sure to revise it regularly with updates and to maintain familiarity; do not pack it away until needed (which could be several years after creation).

Contents of a Succession Plan

Specifically, succession plans document everything from identifying the pool of candidates to linking to the strategic plan.

1. Identify a Strong Applicant Pool

Successful charter school leaders take deliberate steps to develop the next school leader, who is often a member of its leadership team. The succession plan should briefly outline the current strategy for grooming potential future school leaders to create a “pipeline” to the school leadership role.

The school leader should share his/her recommendations for a successor with the board in the event of a leadership emergency. Additionally, the school leader should communicate this

¹ Christine Campbell, “You’re Leaving? Succession and Sustainability in Charter Schools,” *National Charter School Research Project*, University of Washington’s Center on Reinventing Public Education, Nov. 2010, http://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_IC_S_Succession_Nov10_web_0.pdf.

recommendation to the designated successor so that he/she is not taken by surprise, and this potential successor can prepare to interview with the board for that leadership role.

Some experts warn against recording a potential successor's name as—with the passage of time and circumstance—another unnamed candidate may be better suited for the role when the need arises. To guard against this conflict, the board should be vigilant in updating the plan regularly to reflect its latest thinking, minimizing this risk. School leaders should update their board on their recommendation for succession as this recommendation evolves.

2. Maintain the School's Day-to-Day Operations

Charter schools must maintain a steady state of operations at all times—even when the school leader is suddenly unable to perform his or her job. To that end, the succession plan should include the school leader's instructions on the school's daily operations. As much as possible, the school leader should document the information he/she relies on in his/her post, including who has access to bank accounts, who holds passcodes and other confidential information, and who can keep the school running smoothly. Many schools have a master reference file or binder that stores this information in one place.

3. Identify an Interim School Leader

In the event of an emergency, boards will need to identify an interim school leader until either the school leader returns to his/her post or a more in-depth search process can be launched to permanently replace the position. The succession plan should outline the course of action boards will pursue to identify that interim leader—most likely tapping the school's leadership pipeline—and include a job description for the interim leader.

Communicate this part of the plan to the school leadership team before there is an emergency. If there is a leadership emergency, the team will know there is a plan, minimizing uncertainty amongst the staff.

4. Create a Job Description

Leadership transitions are valuable opportunities to think carefully and strategically about the skills and experience the board is looking for in the next school leader. Often, the founders of charter schools are leaders and incredible visionaries able to break down barriers and build initial structures that operationalize the mission of the school. However, as a school becomes more stable, it may need a leader with expertise in sustainability and expansion.

As in any industry, no one leader has all the right skills for the full lifecycle of the organization. Charter school boards should continue to track current school performance relative to the school's long-term goals. Creating a job description that reflects these goals helps boards recruit leaders with the skills necessary to guide schools and students to the highest levels.

5. Conduct the New School Leader Search

The board must decide who of its members will spearhead the search for a new school leader and whether a committee or a search firm will conduct the actual exploration. Be sure to include answers to the following questions in your succession plan:

- How will the full board be involved in the search?

- Who on the board will lead the search?
- Will there be a search committee? If so, what is the specific charge of that committee and who will join it?
- Will the board need to engage a search firm?
- What is the plan for reviewing internal candidates?
- What is the strategy for negotiating the compensation package?

6. Communicate the Change

Communicating effectively with key staff, students, parents, charter authorizers, funders, partners, and the community about this change in leadership is extremely important. Identify what kinds of communication (e.g., press releases, personal calls) are best for each constituency, which persons or groups should be contacted first, and who within the school or on the board executes the communication strategy. The type of message will depend on whether this is a sudden or planned transition, but in either case, laying out the details to be shared and considering all that are affected by the situation will help avoid unnecessary and distracting mishaps or mistakes.

7. Set the Stage for the New Leader's Success

The board should outline the systems and supports it plans to use to ensure the new leader's success. Include the commitment to the school leader having goals, an effective evaluation process, opportunities for professional development, and open lines of communication with the board.

8. Link to the Strategic Plan

Finally, a succession plan must be a part of the school's ongoing strategic planning process to ensure that a leadership change keeps the school on track to reach its long-term goals.

II. GOVERNANCE VS. MANAGEMENT

One of the hardest things to navigate as a charter school board member is the balance between governance and management. What does the board do? What does the school leader do?

The Difference Between Governance and Management

The board plays a significant role in the success of a school. Because the authorizer gives the charter of the school to the board, the board is ultimately accountable for student results and school success. Yet, the board does not pick curriculum, hire teachers, or determine the strategies for driving high student achievement. Where does the board's role end and the school leader's role begin?

One way to think about the two functions is that governance determines and oversees the "what." What kind of school will best educate students? What should the school look like in the future? What is the school's definition of success, and are we on track to get there? Conversely, management determines the "how." How will the school reach those goals and aspirations?

Governance is principally the function of the board, while management is primarily the responsibility of the school staff. Boards and school management are regularly confronted with strategic and operational choices, and as a general rule, boards have final decision-making authority regarding high-level policy issues, while school management is empowered to make operational decisions. Successful schools have a clear, shared understanding of the line between governance and management.

Use the framework below to dive into roles and decision-making rights.

A Framework for Governance and Management

This framework for charter school governance highlights the different roles boards and school leaders play specifically in relation to CBP's Standards for Effective Charter School Governance. Use this chart to engage in a conversation between the board and school leadership to help navigate common questions such as:

- What are the appropriate parameters for boards and school leaders vis-a-vis decision-making as they partner to lead an effective charter school?
- How can board members avoid micromanaging or overstepping their role?
- In which areas are these lines less clear, and how should boards and school leaders address them?

Standards for Effective Boards	Governance/Board	Management/School Leader
	Determines long-term vision for the school and provides oversight to achieve results	Determines implementation plan for how to achieve that vision by designing and implementing strategy and directing school to achieve results
1. Focus relentlessly on student achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes responsibility for the school's student achievement results and overall success • Approves long-term and annual academic goals • Monitors progress toward goals throughout year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produces student achievement results • Suggests long-term and annual academic goals • Determines school program that will result in hitting those goals
2. Ensure Exceptional Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hires the school leader and determines whether he/she is achieving sufficient results • Evaluates school leader • Determines support and professional development appropriate for school leader 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hires staff and determines whether they are achieving sufficient results • Evaluates staff • Determines support and professional development for school staff
3. Commit to Exemplary Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruits, interviews, and votes to add new board members • Determines whether the board is effective by executing and reporting results of annual board self-evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports recruitment process, interviews candidates, and provides feedback • Provides input into effectiveness of the board

Standards for Effective Boards	Governance/Board	Management/School Leader
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitates regularly scheduled, strategic meetings that are well-run and well-attended 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Actively participates in board meetings, helps create agenda
4. Act Strategically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approves strategic plan, provides content input Sets and approves short- and long-term goals for school, school leader, and the board 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drives the strategic planning process, provides significant content input Drafts school and school leader goals for board's input, review, and approval
5. Raise and Use Resources Wisely	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approves budget tied to strategic plan and annual goals Raises money, gives personally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drafts budget aligned with strategic plan and annual goals Raises money
6. Maintain Legal and Regulatory Compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirms that the school is proactively adhering to legal requirements Approves all school policies Approves all major amendments to the school's charter and bylaws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determines and executes plan to guarantee school is in legal compliance Drafts and operates faithfully according to school policies Keeps the board informed of operational issues that might result in a charter/bylaw amendment or threaten compliance/charter

Note that the framework above does not include every decision that needs to be made in relation to the school. The school leader makes thousands of decisions each week that ensure the school's program is netting strong results. Charter school board members also make decisions not represented on this chart. Some decisions fall easily on one leadership side or the other—board or school leader.

The Gray Areas

When building, growing, and sustaining a highly successful school, there may be times when the delineation of roles becomes opaque. Many decisions lie close to the intersection between the board's domain and the school leader's domain of responsibility, which often causes confusion for both as to their respective roles. These are decisions that are unanticipated or require such close collaboration that it becomes unclear who is the ultimate decision maker.

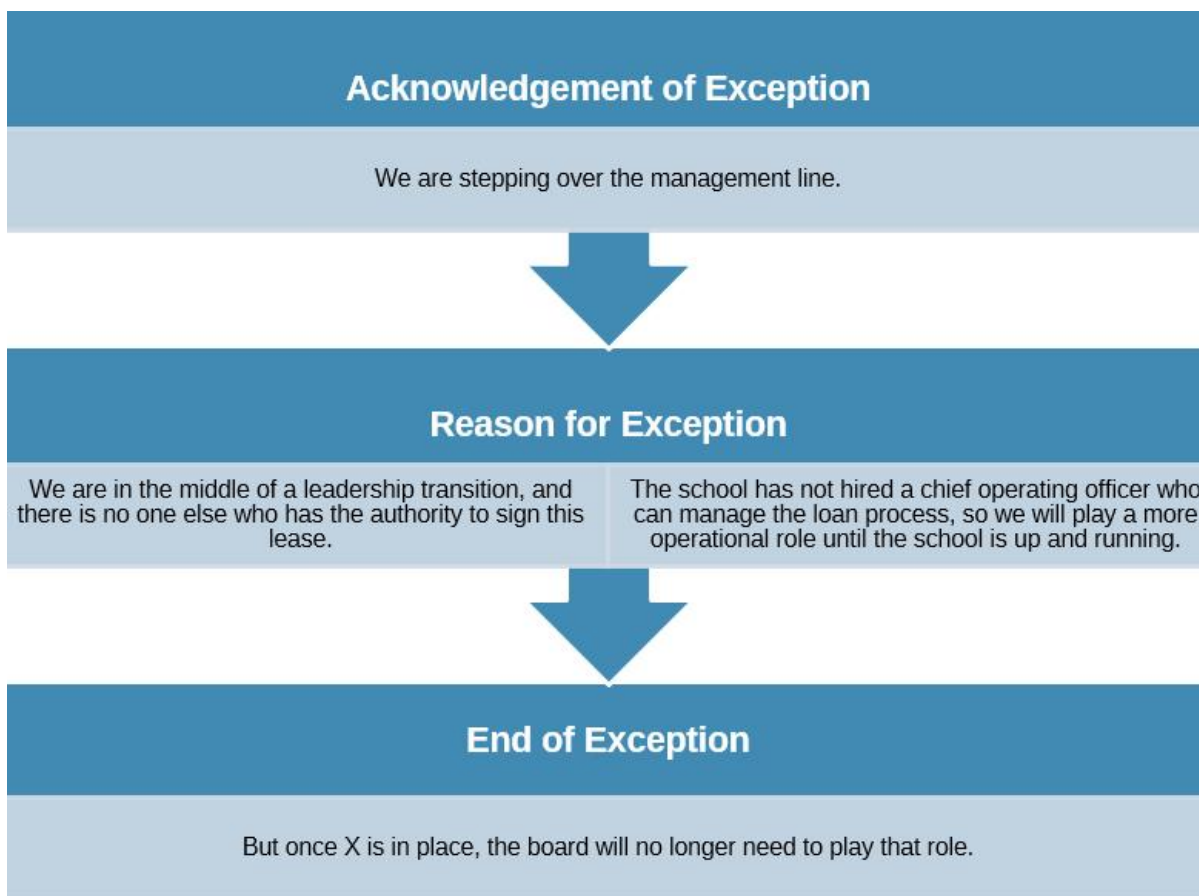
When this happens on your board—and it will—have a conversation with your school leader to clarify responsibility to facilitate progress. There are no decisions where the board and the school leader are ultimately “dual deciders” and no key decision should be left in a gray area. It is okay for board chairs to ask the school leader to clarify roles around certain decisions or actions that need to be taken. Simply say, “This situation falls into a gray area for me. Who needs to make the ultimate decision here, and what role should each of us take in providing input into that decision?”

Regardless of where the primary decision-making or action ultimately rests, it is typical for all parties to provide input into major decisions. Effective communication is paramount.

The Line Can Shift

Soon after the charter is granted, a charter school board often functions as a “startup board,” rolling up its sleeves as members become heavily involved in operational decision-making to compensate for the fact that there is no staff in place yet. As a school matures and hires more staff, the board’s role shifts exclusively toward governance. Similarly, leadership transitions may demand a temporary shift in the line between governance and management.

If circumstances require that the board overstep the typical line between governance and management, it is essential that the full board and leader discuss and be clear about why the exception is acceptable. The three parts of this are first acknowledging the exception, explaining the reason, and then addressing the end-point of this exception.



A Note About CMOs

When the charter is held by a Charter Management Organization (CMO), the balance between the board and the school leader might look different depending on the management agreement the board signs with the CMO. One of the advantages to hiring a CMO is that they make a lot of the leadership decisions and handle many aspects of the budgeting process, facilities, and back-office functions. But boards need to have a conversation with the CMO to really understand who makes what decisions and drives action. The board also needs to assess and evaluate the CMO.

The roles of decision-making and leadership should be clearly articulated in the management contract and reviewed annually by the board.