School Quality Assessment: Where Are You on the Pathway to Success?

A Toolkit for School Leaders

December 2020

NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL RESOURCE CENTER

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Introduction

This resource uses reflective and diagnostic questions to support schools in determining where they are in their journey to achieve success – including but not limited to providing a high-quality education – and if relevant, whether they are ready to replicate or expand their program to serve additional students. The tools in this resource will help you expand beyond questions of student achievement and provide your team with a holistic approach to articulating what success looks like for your school and your plans for achieving it.

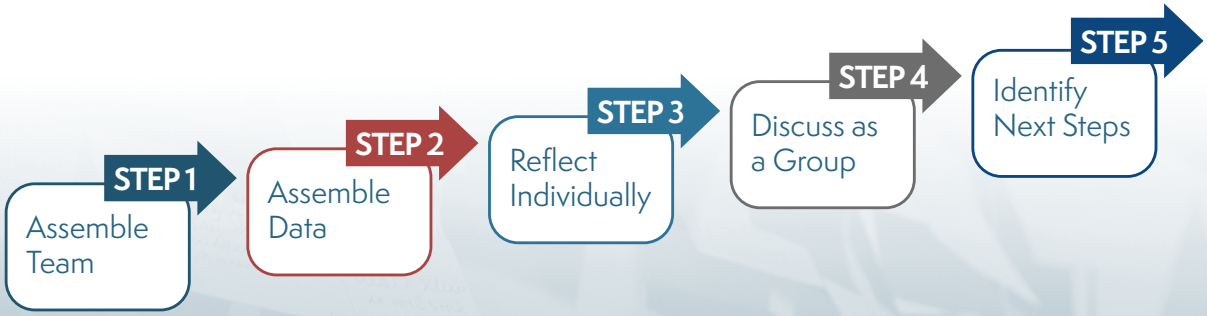
Some schools may complete this activity and find that they are on track to achieving or sustaining their organizational definition of success. From there, some schools may decide that they have the capacity and are motivated to extend their high-quality program to serve more students. Some schools may identify areas in need of improvement and can use the Action Planning Templates to set goals to increase their school's capacity and make changes to achieve and sustain success.

Are you using this tool to plan for replication or expansion? NCSRC is committed to sharing resources that will help high-quality schools expand to provide seats to more students if that is the school's intention. This 2020 case study of AECI demonstrates how one charter school engaged in this decision process using thoughtful, data-driven practices that centered on the needs of students. This tool will reference different components of the case study to demonstrate elements of their planning process.

Expand, when used with respect to a high-quality charter school, means to significantly increase enrollment or add one or more grades to the high-quality charter school. (Section 4310(7) of the ESEA). Replicate means to open a new charter school, or a new campus of a high-quality charter school, based on the educational model of an existing high-quality charter school, under an existing charter or an additional charter, if permitted or required by State law. (Section 4310(9) of the ESEA)

Source: Federal Register

While this tool is designed for any school to use for a general status check, we encourage schools considering replication or expansion to engage in this process before you start formally planning to replicate to an additional school site or expand to serve more students or grade levels. You may choose to use just one part of this resource for a personal reflection, or you might engage in the entire process with your team – it's up to you! Consider the following steps as guidance:



STEP 1 Assemble Your Team

Gather the key decision-makers on your staff, such as governing board members and program leaders. Then, think about what other voices need to be present for your reflection process to be inclusive of all stakeholders, representative of the school and the community you serve. The team should bring diverse perspectives on the school's quality and capacity to the table. Consider including teachers, school counselors, families, students, and community members in your conversations. Consider also how the perspectives of outside organizations, such as major funders and your school's authorizer, might be included.

STEP 2 Assemble Your Data

To get a sense of the strengths and weaknesses of your program, it is helpful to understand your program's current outcomes, and how those outcomes have changed (or not), over time. We suggest reviewing data in two snapshots:

1. Data from the most recent year
2. Data trends over time

Review the same data elements from the most recent year's set of data and from the previous five years if possible. Note that in some cases you will not be able to look at trends over the same length of time, for example, if you changed or skipped assessments one year.

You may already be collecting and compiling the data elements suggested in Table 1 below as part of your annual review or renewal processes. Start with a review of those reports and data, then identify and review supplemental data in the areas below that are not covered as part of your regular review processes. Keep in mind this process is a chance to review the data that most speaks to your school and authorizer's theory and definition of success. Share the resulting data packages with your team before they begin their individual reflections, so everyone is working from a common understanding of your school's data.

Academic Performance and School Culture

Use a robust, diverse set of outcome data to assess academic performance and school culture, including student achievement, student progress over time, and post-secondary readiness, as well as data related to student retention, teacher retention, and student discipline. Review each of the data elements (as appropriate for the grade levels served in your school), disaggregated by grade level and student subgroup, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and special populations such as students receiving special education or English learner services. Figure 1 provides example data elements that relate to academic performance and school culture.

Figure 1: Indicators of Academic Performance and School Culture

Academic Performance	School Culture
• Summative math achievement • Math growth • Grade level benchmark/formative assessments • Summative ELA achievement • ELA growth • On-track to graduate • Graduation rate • PSAT, ACT/SAT • College acceptance rate	• Student attendance/engagement rates • Disciplinary infractions, suspensions, and referrals • Student retention and persistence • Teacher attendance • Teacher retention • Data from any school culture surveys • Staff evaluation data • Data from family satisfaction surveys • Data from student satisfaction surveys

Financial Performance

Although academic performance is an essential priority, it is also critical that you assess financial health in evaluating your school's long-term capacity to operate and serve students at a high level of quality. This is especially true if your school may eventually seek to expand. Financial indicators of distress are sometimes the first sign a school is beginning to struggle, and so it is essential that your reflection process turn a critical lens to these components.[1]

Similar to academic and school culture data, review both short- and long-term financial metrics. Specific and measurable metrics for evaluating financial capacity and viability are suggested in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Short-Term and Long-Term Financial Health Indicators

Short-Term Financial	Long-Term Financial
• Enrollment target vs. actual enrollment • Annual financial audit • Current ratio of assets to liabilities • Unrestricted days cash on hand • Ratio of cash to current liabilities	• Total margin/aggregated 3-year margin • Debt to asset ratio • Cash flow • Debt service coverage ratio • Borrowing history

Community Data

Determining your role and unique offerings in the community you serve will help determine if and how many more seats the market can support. Examining the student population you serve, the geographic span of these students, the level of demand, and any new offerings in the community will help you understand your community's needs and sustained interest in your school's offerings. Example data to examine include:

[1] NCSRC (2020). Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools Part 1: The Role and Perspective of Charter School Authorizers. Bethesda MD: Manhattan Strategy Group.

- Current student population served: number of students per grade level; percentages of students receiving special educational services or English learner services; percentages of students qualifying for free and reduced-priced meals; diversity of the student body in comparison with the local community
- Demand: average number of applications received; average number of students on waitlist
- Outreach: Primary marketing methods used for student recruitment and number of applications received per method; any data that reflect the school's reputation within the community; analysis of possible barriers for student application and enrollment
- Market: review of current and planned schools in your community, including grades and interests served; programmatic changes at neighborhood schools (e.g., implementing preschool program, offering a STEM focus); enrollment trends; important, pertinent changes in the community population

Mission-Specific Data

Other data sources to review may vary depending on your school's mission, goals, and unique model. Examples might include:

- Student demographics as compared to the composition of the community
- Teacher and school leader demographics as compared to demographics of families and the community served
- Advanced course participation and completion
- The quality of community partnerships providing or supporting student learning experiences and/or career exploration
- Internship, apprenticeship, or work-study placement participation
- College enrollment statistics and/or career placement data

EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF QUALITY

Ensure that you are considering equitable access and equitable outcomes in your review of school data. It may be helpful to dedicate time to thinking through the following questions:

- Who thrives at this school? Who struggles?
- Does enrollment in advanced classes represent a diverse body of students?
- Are interventions offered for struggling students? If so, are they effective?
- Is there evidence of equitable outcomes?
- Is there evidence of inequitable outcomes?

STEP 3 Reflect Individually

To prepare for the team meeting in Step 4, provide each team member with Reflection Template, Part 1 to consider and write responses prior to a group discussion. Provide the data necessary to complete their reflections in an easy to understand format.

Understanding where your organization is today is important in any kind of planning process. This seemingly simple step is an easy one to skip over. Certainly, if you spend every workday at a school, you know it well enough to identify strengths and weaknesses off the top of your head – but considering why you hold these beliefs and what evidence grounds your identification of success or challenge is a crucial part of the planning process. In addition, each member of your planning team will bring a different lens to these questions. It is important that your team develop a collective understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses, informed by diverse perspectives, in order to engage in robust conversation and develop a strong plan for moving forward. Taking time to thoughtfully reflect on the specifics of the school and

its community are crucial to developing a plan to achieve and sustain success and make decisions about the future of a school. This step will prepare you to uphold what makes your program high-quality as you move forward in considering replicating or expanding.

STEP 4 Discuss as a Group

Gather your team members to share their reflections and facilitate a conversation on the school's current status. Have you achieved your organization's definition of success, or are you still experimenting with your model? Do you meet the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)'s definition of a high-quality school?[2] What areas of improvement or growth exist?

ARE YOU A HIGH-QUALITY CHARTER SCHOOL?

With your team, review the definition of a "high-quality charter school" from ESSA and discuss which components of the definition apply to your school, and which components signal areas for improvement. *The term ''high-quality charter school'' means a charter school that— (A) shows evidence of strong academic results, which may include strong student academic growth, as determined by a State; (B) has no significant issues in the areas of student safety, financial and operational management, or statutory or regulatory compliance; (C) has demonstrated success in significantly increasing student academic achievement, including graduation rates where applicable, for all students served by the charter school; and (D) has demonstrated success in increasing student academic achievement, including graduation rates where applicable, for each of the subgroups of students, as defined in section 1111(c)(2), except that such demonstration is not required in a case in which the number of students in a group is insufficient to yield statistically reliable information or the results would reveal personally identifiable information about an individual student.*

See the appendices of this toolkit for a series of tools that can help a facilitator guide this group discussion. The Facilitator's Agenda for Group Reflection and Discussion guides the team in examining the school outcomes that guided team members' reflections and the school's capacity to achieve and sustain success. The Reflection Templates can be used to reflect on the history and mission of your school, the community it serves, the components of the school that make it successful, and where the school's weaknesses lie. As a team, you will share your perceptions of the schools' areas of success and challenges in attaining ESSA's definition of a high-quality school and equitable outcomes for students. You might also discuss what you know about the community and how it has changed, and how any potential expansion or replication would support the needs and goals of that community. The Action Planning Templates can guide the team in prioritizing goals that address any decision you pursue: addressing areas of improvement identified, replicating, or expanding.

STEP 5 Identify Next Steps

Once your team has engaged in a robust discussion and arrived at a consensus around key beliefs and goals related to the school's success, you will want to translate that consensus into action steps. Your steps may include working on areas of challenge, leveraging your success into opportunities for sustainability or growth, or – most likely – a combination of the two.

[2] See ESSA definition of high-quality here: Sec. 4310 (3) (4) (7) (8) and (9) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA.

Identifying your school's challenges, opportunities for improvement, and successes are crucial to getting a school on track to becoming high quality and developing and sustaining school success. Consider your most important areas for improvement, as well as your strengths, and plan for identifying and allocating resources and leveraging successes to address these needs. See Action Planning Templates in appendices for further information.

If your team believes that your school is currently successful, achieving its mission, and meeting ESSA's definition of high quality, determine where you'd like to go next, using the Action Planning Templates. Perhaps you are considering focusing on sustaining your current work, disseminating promising practices, or growing to serve more students. Determine the factors that are driving success and define your priorities for building on that success. Consider how the priorities and steps you identify can feed into your school's larger strategic planning process. As a team, articulate the core elements of your model that led to your success. Consider using SMART objectives to articulate exactly how these core components led to your school achieving its mission and meeting ESSA's definition of a high-quality school. If your school eventually replicates or expands, these core components of your successful model will drive that process.

Conclusion

If the consensus is that your school is high quality and you confirm the need for more for seats in your community, consider working closely with your authorizer(s) to discuss if expansion or replication is the right path. Continue to deepen your understanding of what works in your program and think through how you can serve more students in a manner that aligns with your mission and meets your school's capacity and abilities. If your team realizes that you need to focus on your current school's plan for achieving and sustaining success, great! You've made an important decision by focusing on the students and families you're currently serving. Consider revisiting this toolkit later to see if your school is ready to consider expansion or replication.

Appendix A: Facilitator's Agenda for Group Reflection and Discussion

The following agenda was developed to achieve three goals:

- Identify the extent to which the school meets the ESSA definition of a *high-quality charter school.*[3]
- Share and develop consensus around areas of success and opportunities for improvement.
- Develop action plans to improve school performance, celebrate successes, and/or move forward with replication or expansion.

The agenda can be used as a guide to facilitate the group discussion. It is flexible so you can customize it for your team. For example:

- The activities and discussion are divided into four sections that can take place in one or multiple sessions.
- Video segments of a charter school reflecting on its readiness for replication are offered as an example for discussion. These videos may be used in real time during the group discussion or watched during the individual reflection as part of the preparation for this discussion.
- In lieu of individual reflection prior to the meeting, points of individual reflection can be built into the agenda below to allow for real time reflection as well as group discussion.

BEFORE YOU MEET

Designate participants to take on these helpful roles:

- Timekeeper
- Notetaker
- Data summarizer
- Designated facilitator

Prepare meeting materials:

- Data as described in Step 2: Assemble Your Data in digestible forms, such as visual charts
- Reflection Templates, Parts 1 & 2
- Action Planning Templates
- Video links (embedded below)

Session Length: 4 hours

Section	Agenda Item	Materials	Duration
1	Introduction 1. Establish group discussion norms. 2. Review objectives and agenda.	None	5 minutes
1	What is our history, mission, and the community context? 1. Use the Reflection Template, Part 1 questions to guide discussion. *NOTE: It is up to you whether this portion would be best delivered as a presentation or as a discussion. If using the template to guide discussion, consider extending the session to create more time for sharing and/or discussion in a larger group.*	Reflection Template, Part 1	10 minutes

[3] See ESSA definition of high-quality here: Sec. 4310 (3) (4) (7) (8) and (9) of the ESEA, as amended by the ESSA.

Section	Agenda Item	Materials	Duration
1	How do we define success? 1. Use the questions in the Reflection Template, Part 2 to assess whether your school meets the ESSA criteria of a high-quality school. • Review your data to determine the extent to which you meet each of the criteria and what data can be used as evidence. 2. Watch *Defining Success* (3 minutes) as an example of how one school [New York City Charter High School of Architecture, Engineering & Construction Industries (AECI)] defined success for its students when evaluating whether the school should replicate. 3. Review your data, answer the Student Success questions in Reflection Template, Part 2, and determine what data can be used as evidence of these successes.	Reflection Template, Part 2 Data snapshots	45 minutes
2	What is our capacity to achieve and sustain success? 1. Watch *Challenges & Timing* (5 minutes) to see how AECI navigated some of the most difficult parts of the replication process. 2. Review your gathered data and discuss the questions pertaining to capacity in the Reflection Template.	Reflection Template, Part 2 Data snapshots	60 minutes
3	Summarize and Take Stock 1. Discuss and summarize areas of success and opportunities for improvement: • What data demonstrate that our school serves all students well? What do we know about the students who can't access or don't attend our school, or those who struggle here, and why? • What data demonstrate that our school has the capacity to learn and adapt to challenges? • What strengths and deficits exist within the current board membership? Within the leadership team? Within the staff at large? • What specific elements of the school are generating success and how are they generating success? • What specific elements of the school would benefit from changes and improvements?	Reflection Template, Part 1 Reflection Template, Part 2	60 minutes
4	Next Steps 1. Watch *The Decision to Replicate* (5 minutes) to learn about AECI's considerations in deciding whether to replicate. 2. Engage in a preliminary discussion on the pros and cons related to replication or expansion and brainstorm the initial implications of moving forward. 3. Watch *Community Engagement* (5 minutes) to see how AECI moved to the second phase of decision making. 4. Use the Action Planning Template, Part 1 to identify needs, desired outcomes, and goals to improve school performance, celebrate successes, and/or move forward with replication or expansion. 5. Use the Action Planning Template, Part 2 to identify action items, responsibilities, and a timeline for addressing the identified goals.	Action Planning Template, Part 1 Action Planning Template, Part 2	60 minutes
	Adjourn		

Appendix B: Reflection Templates

The purpose of this template is to provide a guide for your team to reflect on the history and mission of your school, its relationship to the community it serves, and the extent to which it fulfills the needs of the community.

Reflection Template, Part 1

Category	Question	Individual Reflection	Notes from Group Discussion
History and Mission	Why was the school founded?		
	How would you describe the school's mission or goal?		
	What has changed since the school opened?		
	What programs or areas of focus are unique, e.g., wraparound services, targeted student populations?		

Category	Question	Individual Reflection	Notes from Group Discussion
Community Context	How would you define the school's community?		
	How has the community changed since the school opened?		
	What strengths exist in the community?		
	What challenges exist in the community?		
	What does the community value in its schools?		
	How is the school meeting community need(s)?		
	What is the nature of the school's relationship with the community as a whole? With families?		
	What organizations does your school consider to be community partners? How do these partnerships support students, families, and the school?		

Reflection Template, Part 2

The purpose of this template to provide a forum for your team to reflect on the overall quality of your program, the school's strengths and weaknesses in several key areas, and your readiness for replication and expansion.

Category	Question	Individual Reflection	Notes from Group Discussion	Opportunities for Improvement	Data Showing Demonstrated Successes
Criteria for High-quality Schools (according to ESSA)	How does the school's student achievement compare to the surrounding locality? District? State? How does the school's academic growth compare?				
	How does the school's graduation rate compare to your surrounding locality? District? State?				
	What do post-secondary outcomes look like for students who've attended the school?				
	Are there any issues with student safety or perception of student safety?				
	Is the school meeting requirements for statutory and regulatory compliance?				
	How would you describe the strength of the school's financial management?				
	What is the school's financial health projection?				

Category	Question	Individual Reflection	Notes from Group Discussion	Opportunities for Improvement	Data Showing Demonstrated Successes
Student Success	Which students are thriving? Which are struggling?				
	What does it look like for a student to thrive here? What happens when a student struggles here?				
	In what ways does the student body reflect the community? In what ways does it not?				
	Is student enrollment stable, growing, or decreasing?				
	Is enrollment at, below, or above the school's capacity?				
	What do we know about our alumni? Where do they go to school? What careers do they select, and how successful are they in pursuing their future education and career goals?				

Category	Question	Individual Reflection	Notes from Group Discussion	Opportunities for Improvement	Data Showing Demonstrated Successes
Capacity to Achieve and Sustain Success	How would you describe the capacity of the school's governing board? What gaps in knowledge or resources exist?				
	How would you describe the capacity of the school's leader / leadership team? What gaps in knowledge or resources exist?				
	How would you describe the capacity of the school's instructional staff? What gaps in knowledge or resources exist?				
	How would you describe the capacity of the school's student support staff? What gaps in knowledge or resources exist?				
	How would you describe the capacity of the school's community and family support staff? What gaps in knowledge or resources exist?				
	How would you describe the quality of your community partner organizations? Do any partnerships require strengthening? What gaps in your organizational capacity could be supported by new or improved community partnerships?				

Appendix C: Action Planning Templates

Action Planning Template, Part 1

To determine next steps, reflect as a team on the school's desired outcomes. These may be opportunities for improvement brainstormed in previous steps, or a need to replicate or expand to serve more students. Use the Action Planning Template, Part 1 to identify the gaps between your desired outcomes and your current status. Then, think through how your team can address these needs, whether your school is focused on achieving and sustaining success or replicating or expanding. Once you have identified the school's desired outcomes and gaps, the team should think through and document the school's goals for meeting each need.

Desired Outcomes	Gaps	Goals

Action Planning Template, Part 2

For each goal identified in Part 1, write out an objective to be accomplished as part of that goal. Think of the objectives as action items that need to be completed for the goal to be met. Objectives should relate to the needs and desired outcomes you listed in the Action Planning Template, Part 1. What would it look like for your school to accomplish that objective? How will you measure this? Work with the team to decide on target dates and team members responsible for completing each objective. Think through the resources needed for the team member or members to accomplish each objective. Brainstorm any possible obstacles that could get in the way of the objective – how can the team think ahead to resolve these challenges?

Goal:_____

Evidence of Accomplishment	Target Date	Team Member Responsible	Resources Needed	Possible Obstacles and Strategies to Overcome Them

For Further Reading: U.S. Department of Education and NCSRC Resources

Charter School Programs Grants for Replication and Expansion of High-Quality Charter Schools

The U.S. Department of Education's Charter School Programs (CSP) office has a goal to increase the number of high-quality charter schools available to students across America. Schools that believe they are providing a high-quality education might consider applying for a CSP grant to replicate or expand.

Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools Part 1: The Role and Perspective of Charter School Authorizers

This report identified indicators of distress, or early warning signs, that authorizers observe in charter schools beginning to struggle. Schools might use this report to check their own practices and challenges against the indicators authorizers identify as frequent predictors of school failure or distress.

Preparation for Replication: Case Study of AECI

This case study of a single school that successfully replicated into a second school includes video interviews with school leaders, board members, and a representative from the second school's authorizer. The videos focus on knowing, defining, and providing evidence of success; deciding what, why, and how to replicate; and community engagement as a comprehensive and inclusive process.

SMART Objectives Toolkit

The SMART Objectives Toolkit can help your team walk through the process of translating your plans and intentions into specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound (SMART) objectives. This toolkit will be particularly useful for any organization that currently holds or is considering applying for CSP grant funding.