

School Quality: Pointed Advice and Guidance for Charter School Boards

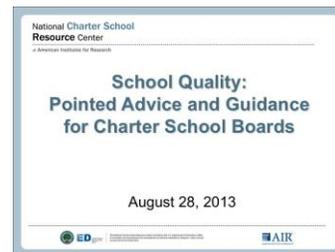
Part 1



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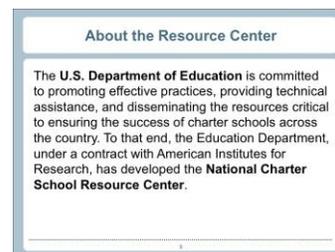
TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Tammie Knights from the National Charter School Resource Center, and I'm pleased to welcome you to the webinar, *School Quality: Pointed Advice [and Guidance] for Charter School Boards*.



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The Resource Center is funded by the Department of Education's Charter Schools Program and serves as a national center to provide resources, information, and technical assistance to support the successful planning, authorizing, implementation, and sustainability of high-quality charter schools; to share evaluations on the effect of charter schools; and to disseminate information about successful practices in charter schools.



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I want to quickly remind you about our webinar platform. You can listen to the audio portion either through your computer or over the phone. If you do join by phone, please mute your computer speakers to prevent an echo effect. If you are not prompted to enter your phone number, please dial the number that is listed in the top of the chat. For any questions you have, please enter them in the chat throughout the webinar.

You will find a copy of the PowerPoint to today's presentation in the box located directly under the chat called NCSRC File Share.

As a reminder, the webinar is being recorded. So to ensure audio quality, I have muted all of the participants. We will be using the chat feature to address questions. If we don't get to your question right away, we will definitely address them at the end of the presentation.

With that said, today's webinar will feature Carrie Irvin, President of Charter Board Partners. She will discuss strategies to focus on school qualities; share examples of actions that boards have taken to address school performance; and discuss options such as takeover, merger, and turnaround. And with that said, I will turn it over to Carrie.

CARRIE IRVIN:

Thank you so much, Tammie, and good afternoon everyone or good morning, depending on where you are. Thank you so much for choosing to spend this time talking about what I consider to be the most important topic in charters—in the charter school movement today: which is how are we—all of us, working on boards and in charter school support organizations and in charter schools themselves—focusing on increasing not just the quantity but more importantly the quality of charter schools and the education they provide to their students. I'm going to, as Tammie said, first walk through the first section of the presentation and then we will break for questions. I will then give some examples of charter school board actions and take some more questions. If we run out of time today, I'd be happy to entertain any questions that you ask in the chat via e-mail afterward.



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A charter school should only stay open if it is providing an excellent education to its students. Every charter school has a dual bottom line: organizational success and sustainability plus academic success. Both of these bottom lines are essential.

Today, we will focus on what, in my view, are the most important things a charter school board can, should, and, in fact, must do to ensure that your school is high quality, high performing, and always improving. It is the duty and the responsibility of the board of the charter school to hold itself and to hold the school leader accountable for strong student performance and high academic achievement. After discussing these four points that you see on this slide, I will then share some stories of boards that we work with here in Washington, D.C., that have taken courageous actions to better serve their students. Next slide please, Tammie. Thank you.

First, let's focus on what boards need to think about and what you need to organize yourselves to do. Next slide please.

The four main things every charter school board in our view should focus on to ensure that your school is high performing—focused on the academic achievement of your students and always striving to improve—[are as follows:]

1. Function effectively and govern strategically. Be a good board. It is up to the board of a charter school to make sure that your school has a strong board, so commit to being an effective board.
2. Know how well the school is doing and know how well the students in your school are doing.
3. Keep all options open.
4. Be proactive in how you address those options.

Today's Discussion Points:

- ▶ The most important things boards must do to improve the quality of their school
- ▶ The duty of boards to take necessary action to improve school performance
- ▶ The importance of accountability
- ▶ Examples of courageous actions boards have taken to improve school quality

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What can I do to improve my school?

1. Be an effective board!
2. Know how well the school is doing
3. Keep all options open
4. Be proactive

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Let's start with Number 1.

At Charter Board Partners, we believe that every charter school board needs to focus on six areas. These are our standards for highly effective charter school boards. Any board that is spending most of its time not focused on these six things and focused on other things is most likely not an effective and strategic board. The six areas in which charter school boards should focus most of your time and energy are [as follows:]

1. Focus relentlessly on student achievement.
Today's presentation will be largely devoted to this area. Although as you'll see, these other five standards relate to, are encompassed by, and are included and embedded in that first standard—focus relentlessly on student achievement.
2. Recruit and retain an exceptional leader. We all know that board members are much less directly involved in providing an excellent education to students. But the person who is directly responsible and accountable for the quality of education is the school leader. That person is hired by, evaluated by, supported by, and, if necessary, replaced by the board. So the leadership of the school is the board's responsibility.
3. Invest in exemplary governance. Again, be a good board. It is up to the board of a charter school to invest in its own quality—invest in its own capacity to function effectively. That is the point of independent, self-sustaining governance, which is what all nonprofits, including charter schools, are committed to upholding.
4. [The] charter school board must act strategically and be willing to hold itself accountable for the performance of the school.
5. It is the responsibility of a charter school board to ensure that the leader has the resources that he or

1. Be an Effective Board!



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she needs to implement the educational program and to use those resources wisely. So a charter school board oversees the allocation of resources as well as raising additional resources as they are needed outside of per-pupil expenditures.

6. It is the responsibility of a charter school board to commit to legal and regulatory compliance. We won't go into a lot of detail about that today because, as you all probably know, legal and regulatory requirements vary wildly from state to state and jurisdiction to jurisdiction. So that is something we would have to go into offline, but it is the responsibility of the board to ensure that the school is in compliance with all legal and regulatory requirements.

I won't go into a lot of detail other than to lay out those standards broadly. But I will say that in our experience working very, very closely with 20 charter school boards here in D.C. over the past three years, these are what I would point out as the probably most significant and most influential levers to improve the quality of your board:

1. Do you have the right people around the board table with the right skills, experience, expertise, characteristics, temperament, and commitment level to function as a cohesive, effective board?
2. Does everyone on your board and does the school leader understand the role of the board?
 - Understand the balance between governance and management.
 - Understand what it is boards are supposed to do and are responsible for doing, and what it is that they are not and should not be doing.

In our experience, there hasn't been a lot of discussion in the charter school; it's a young movement as you all know. And there hasn't been a lot of focus, and there isn't much consensus

Key quality levers:

- ▶ Are the right people around your table?
- ▶ Does the board understand its role?
- ▶ Are you operating through committees?
- ▶ Are you evaluating your school leader every year, well?
- ▶ Are you goal-based?
- ▶ Are you evaluating your board's performance and effectiveness every year?

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around what is the responsibility and what are the roles of a charter school board.

3. Are you operating through committees? Every effective nonprofit board and charter school board operates through a robust committee structure where 80 percent of the strategic work of the board is done through committees. This is not as common as it should be, but we recommend that this is an excellent, excellent starting place if you're feeling that your board is not functioning as effectively as it needs to be.
4. Is your board evaluating the school leader every year and doing it well—in a goal-based way—based on an annually updated job description and in the spirit of a constructive partnership marked by candor, trust, and honesty?
5. Are you goal based? Every board should have goals every year: goals for yourself as a board, goals for the school leader, and goals for the school as a whole. And you should be monitoring your performance toward those goals every quarter during the year. As they say, you only hit what you aim for. And we believe that it is very difficult for a charter school board to be strategic and to ensure that they are leading the school to where it needs to go without functioning in a goal-based way.
6. Lastly, are you evaluating yourself as a board every year, using a high-quality evaluation tool, to make sure that you are in fact functioning effectively and strategically as a board?

The second area of focus for boards to focus on improving and sustaining high academic achievement at the school is that you need to know how well the school is doing academically, organizationally, and operationally. And this is hard. This is really at the heart of the work of a board, and it is very, very hard. Board members are part-time volunteers, not full-time employees of the school. And this information is not readily apparent or obvious. There is a lot of information, a lot of data, a lot of detail, and many, many complex layers involved in really understanding how healthy is the school and how well the students are performing, and how robust the culture is.

Boards need to be reviewing good, solid dashboards that include this information. Each board member needs to make sure that you understand the information in the dashboard. And if you don't understand it because you don't have the professional expertise or experience yourself, then a board member has the responsibility to seek out training and support and additional information. If the board member is not understanding it because nobody on the board is understanding it, then it is quite possible that it is not the right information. It is not given at the right level or with the right frequency, in which case the board as a whole needs to address—making sure that the board is getting the right information at the right level of detail, and that that information is accurate.

It is absolutely essential that boards not rely solely on the school leader to decide what information the board sees. That is difficult to operationalize for a number of reasons. Boards are very loyal to and work very closely with the leader of the school. And, naturally, we all want to and should trust the leader of the school. But it is critical that boards understand that you are legally, morally, and ethically required to trust and verify by creating a relationship with the school leader based on trust, candor, proactivity, and honesty. Boards can create an environment where needing to get information from additional sources and asking very difficult questions of

2. Know How Well the School Is Doing

- ▶ You are responsible for accurately understanding the organizational, operational, and academic health of the school
 - ▶ Academic AND financial dashboards
 - ▶ At least quarterly
- ▶ Academic committee must meet, review, and interpret data regularly, working with school leader/staff
- ▶ School leader cannot be the only source of information (although challenging for boards to access other info)
- Authorizer—ensure you are getting all performance information in a timely manner; seek comparative data
- State association—seek comparative data
- Support organizations working in the school—ask for presentations/data
- Board coach/external third party—objective but informed voice
- "Audit"—hire a firm or consultant; be careful about quality and cost

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the school leader does not imply or indicate a lack of trust. It just means the board is doing your job, and it is up to the board to create that kind of culture and that kind of relationship. But it's hard, and we see it go awry often.

I've listed on this slide other sources of information. But, again, it is challenging. Boards never want to be going behind the back or over the head of the school leader. Again, which is why you have to work to create a culture and a relationship in which the leader knows that you are not displaying a lack of trust but that you are fulfilling your responsibility to get additional information.

More and more in our work here in D.C.—so I've listed different sources.

- You can make sure that you know what performance information the authorizer is releasing.
- You can work with a state association to look for comparative data, and, again, make sure that you're getting some examples of other dashboards so that you can make sure that you're getting the appropriate information.
- You can get information from other organizations working in the school that are providing, for example, interim assessments.

I don't know if any of you are familiar with ANET [[The Achievement Network](#)], and I'm sure there are other organizations. But, again, what you don't want to be doing is going to those organizations behind the back of the school leader. The appropriate step would be to ask the school leader: "Can we have a presentation by ANET or whatever, whoever else is working in the school that might have that information?" Work together with the school leader to structure that presentation.

More and more in our work, we are seeing boards begin to explore this idea of an audit—not a financial audit, but

this is really a health and wellness audit. It's too soon to be able to recommend that to you all because I would say this is a fledgling part of the charter school movement. But we are finding that it is very, very challenging for volunteer board members to be able to get the level of detail and the true knowledge of how well a school is doing. So I will keep you posted as the field develops a sense of consensus about this.

But I will say that here in Washington, [D.C.], there are some individuals and there are some firms who can come in and do what they call an audit, where they really are coming into the school and looking at the quality of the academic program, the instructional culture. Things like why teachers are leaving and why teachers are staying—there are all different kinds of indexes that some of these terrific organizations are developing.

But I am really beginning to wonder if most boards will need to outsource this process of getting this information every year. But the big point—the overarching point—is it is never enough; it is never okay just to rely on what the school leader is telling you, as wonderful and strong as she or he may be. And when we talk about some examples, I'll tell you some of the pitfalls that we are seeing. Again, responsible boards trust and verify.

The number 3 thing that boards need to focus on to ensure that the quality of education in your school is high and is improving: Know what actions your board would need to take if the student performance in your school is low and know when you would need to take those actions. Plan ahead and have contingency plans prepared in case of student performance decline or in case a low-performing school does not improve.

Best case, you won't need these contingency plans. Worst case is you need them and you don't have them, and that is a very, very bad case—both in terms of keeping the school open and, more importantly, for the

3. Keep All Options Open

(and know when you might need to exercise them)

- ▶ **Be realistic and clear eyed**
 - Not sentimental, overly loyal, or in denial
- ▶ **What will we do if performance...**
 - ... declines for x years in a row?
 - ... falls below y level?
 - ... is persistently unacceptable to us?
- ▶ **Enact "succession planning" for the school**
 - Just as the board should always know the plan for the next school leader and the next board chair, the board should have an eye on the next chapter for the school

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students that you are serving in the school. So we really recommend that you commit as a board to being realistic and clear eyed about what would need to happen if the students in your school are not receiving the education that they deserve and the education they signed up for when they came to your school.

Loyalty to the leader is secondary...[an] understanding of extenuating circumstances and difficult context and poverty levels in the community—all those other things. Those should not be your guiding, driving forces. Providing a high-quality education is the driving force that every board should feel, and that is more important than loyalty and all these other factors.

So boards need to have this hard discussion. What will we do as a board? If student performance in this school declines for X years in a row, falls below Y level, it's persistently unacceptable to us as a board. I'll tell you in a little while about a school board that went through this process. And even though student improv[ement]—I'm sorry, student achievement—had improved, the board recognized that it hadn't improved enough to make them feel objectively as though the school was providing a good education.

So you have to know what the triggers are for your particular board.

- Is it a particular achievement level?
- What is it that you are looking for on the dashboard?
- How will you as a board know and what are the triggers that you as a board are going to set?

And then when you do that, it is almost as though you're doing succession planning for the school. So we recommend that every board has a succession plan for the school leader and a succession plan for the board chair. Who will the next board chair be and how will that

person be selected? And what will you do if your school leader leaves or becomes unable to do the job? Those are succession plans that must always be in place before you need them, and I would argue the same kind of succession plan should be in place for the school before you need it. Again, best case, you don't need it; you're running a great school and achievement is good and achievement is improving. But that is not the case for many charter schools. And every one of those boards should be talking about [the following:] "What will we do if things don't get better? What will we do if things get worse, or what are we going to do now that things are not good?"

There are four options I wanted to run over with you that boards need to discuss and be aware of and, if necessary, seek outside help in fleshing out as realistic options. This is not an exhaustive list. But these are, to my knowledge, the four primary options available to the boards of low-performing schools. So the board of a low-performing school that has decided that this is not acceptable to the level of student achievement and the quality of education is not acceptable [has] four main options open.

Number 1 is replace the school leader. That is the least "invasive," if you will, of these four options—which is saying quite a bit—because that is a terribly difficult thing to do, for the board to proactively replace the leader as opposed to the leader leaving of her own accord.

In order to have this as a realistic option, the board needs to, as I said earlier, be evaluating that leader every year. And that is how you will know if the leader is in fact doing a great job, is doing a good job, and with support can be doing a great job, or is in fact not doing a good job. Using a good evaluation tool year after year provides that information and provides the cover that you need if you do decide that that leader is not the best leader for the school.

3. Keep All Options Open

continued

Options include:

► School leader replacement:

- Evaluate annually
- Proactively provide support
- Have a succession plan
- Set and honor high expectations

► Internal turnaround:

- Board stays in place, school leadership and staff generally change
- External consultant often hired to run the turnaround
- Not usually effective (according to research)—problems tend to persist

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Boards need to remember that the two responsibilities for that leader are to hold her accountable and provide the support she needs to meet her goals. So don't prioritize accountability over support. There are many, many good charter school leaders that could be great with the right support, and boards need to be identifying in which ways they can support the head.

Again, you have to have a succession plan. It is very difficult to replace the leader when you have no idea who else would lead the school. But that's not a good reason to keep a low-performing leader in place.

And, finally, set and honor high expectations for the leader. Don't allow excuses to rule the day. Just like we want our school leaders and our teachers to hold very high expectations for students—and accept and create a no-excuses culture in which all students are given the opportunity to achieve at high levels—we have to set and honor those same high expectations for the school leader. Again, be clear eyed about this even when the school leader is the one who recruited you to this board and maybe this is a friend of yours, and maybe this is someone who you truly know is doing her absolute best job and is the most passionate person you've ever met about educating students. If the students are not receiving a high-quality education, that is not enough.

Option number 2 that boards of low-performing schools need to be educated about and aware of and discuss: It's called a turnaround—internal turnaround; it goes by different names. But basically this is a turnaround. This is where your board stays in place, and you replace most or all of the adults in the school. A lot of times, an extra consultant is hired to run that turnaround.

Turnaround has a bad rap in the research bins. A lot of the problems that led the school to need to be turned around tend to persist, even when leadership is replaced.

There are many research papers written about this, but sometimes it works. I'm going to tell you a story in a little bit about a situation that seems to [be] working; it's been working well. But I will tell you that the research community doesn't put a lot of faith in internal turnaround.

Option number 3 to the board of a low-performing school is something called restart. This is something that is gaining in prominence in the charter sector as an alternative to turnaround. The biggest difference, and it doesn't sound that different, but it is a big difference, is [that] not only does the leadership of the school change, but actually the board changes, too. It is really an entirely different school when you undergo a restart. The building, the facilities, [and] the physical assets stay in place, and the students stay in place. But it is a different school, with a different name run by completely different people, usually a school operator, an organization that runs schools.

One would think, on its face, that option number 2, the turnaround option, feels very similar to this. But as it happens, even with new leadership in the school, even with a lot of new teachers, it is hard to reverse and to really reboot all of those problems that led to the turnaround.

This idea of restart is that you are actually erasing the old school. It no longer exists; it is a new school. But for the students, they get to stay. It is not destructive to the students that are staying in that building, and the charter school movement doesn't lose that facility. They are able to retain that facility for a different charter school.

And then, finally, and fairly obviously, the other option on the table for boards of a low-performing school is closure. This is when the charter is actually dissolved. The charter is taken away from the board. The authorizers do this to schools, and schools do this to themselves. Schools can, boards can voluntarily relinquish a charter, and they do so

5. Keep All Options Open

continued

- ▶ **Restart:**
 - Students and facilities stay in place
 - Board and school operator change; entirely new school except for the building
 - Gaining in prominence as alternative to turnaround
- ▶ **Closure:**
 - Charter is dissolved (voluntarily or not)
 - Assets liquidated
 - Students displaced
 - Disruptive: students may end up worse off, but it honors charter bargain of accountability

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for various reasons. And then authorizers take the charter away when even, you know, sometimes the board is giving it up involuntarily. And, needless to say, that is very disruptive for everyone involved—students, teachers, [and] the community. This leads to a lot of upset and a lot of disruption. But this is, if you take it away from the individual school level and look at the sector level, this is part of the bargain of charter schools. Part of the reason we're all invested in charter schools and in the success of charter schools is because, unlike with traditional public schools, failing schools may not persist. They cannot stay open year after year after year. It is not supposed to be as hard to close a charter school. So even though it is enormously disruptive, charter advocates would tell you that this can never be taken off the table as an option.

The fourth element of what boards need to do to ensure that your school is providing a high-quality education is to be proactive—not reactive, not complacent—and do not assume that things are going well until you hear otherwise.

The best boards are the boards that ask very hard questions, even when things are going well, but especially when they're not. And even when you don't know the answer; boards are not supposed to only ask questions that you can answer. What you are looking for is to make sure that the leader of your school is thinking about all the things that you'd want her to be thinking about if she's running an organization that is providing a top quality education. You don't have to know the answer 'cause you're not running the school. You're not the school leader—she is or he is.

You need to be proactively seeking the information to know if those triggers are being reached: Has improvement declined year after year? If you're only getting partial information from your school leader, you won't necessarily know that. And again, I say this not to imply that you should be distrustful of the school leader.

4. Be Proactive

- ▶ If triggers are reached, be prepared to act on your plans
- ▶ Don't wait too long, because:
 - it will be harder to act strategically
 - your options become limited
 - it's not fair to the students
- ▶ Do the right thing. Even when it is really hard.

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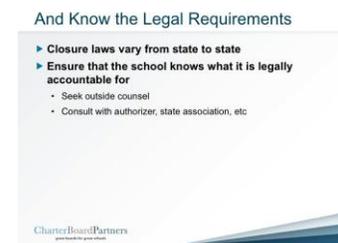
But we all know that it is possible to present data in a way that looks good and not present other data that would look worse. So you need to make sure you have all the information you need to know.

- Is achievement for all students in your school declining?
- Have you reached a certain trigger point in terms of low achievement?
- Do you have enough information to know that you can confidently say that your school is providing a high-quality education to its students?

Proactivity is incredibly important in a timeliness sense. The longer you wait, the harder it is to act strategically. Your options become more limited, and, most importantly, you have now confined those students in your school to a low-quality, subpar education, which is exactly what they thought they were not getting when they signed up to go to your charter school. Charter school boards have to do the right thing even when it is really hard, and sometimes it is really hard. And again, we're going to talk in a minute about some stories that will illustrate that.

Finally, again as I said, I can't talk a lot about the legal requirements because they vary so wildly. But you can get information about what the closure laws are, what the authorizer is looking at, and what their criteria are for getting on the closure list. And what you as a board and what the school is legally accountable for. You should have outside counsel available to your board either on a paid or pro bono basis. And you should make sure that your leader has the kinds of relationships with the authorizer and the state association that allows you to make sure that you have up-to-date and accurate information.

With that, Tammie, I would like to take a—I think we said a 10-minute—question period before I move on to the examples.



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TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Great, Carrie. We did have several questions that came in through the chat that I'll just go through so we can go through a little bit of clarification details and just some advice that you have for folks. One came in about dashboards: "Are there particular elements that you have found that are effective on dashboards? And are there dashboard report forms that you have used that are widely available?"

CARRIE IRVIN:

It's a great, great question, and it turns out they are not widely available at all, which is a shame because almost every board needs this.

We are working very hard at Charter Board Partners on putting together a great tool that has a lot of sample dashboards. We're having a hard time because even high-performing schools it turns out they don't have great dashboards. There's still not a consensus in the field about what level of information boards should get and in what form. We believe very strongly that succinct information is incredibly important for boards. A 40-page dashboard is not a dashboard. That's not—a dashboard needs to be an easily digestible snapshot.

One of the areas in which we're working and one of the recommendations I would have for you all is that the academic committee and the finance committee of the board—and I would also add the governance committee but we don't need to talk about that today. But for the purposes at hand here, particularly the academic committee [needs]...

Part 2**CARRIE IRVIN:**

...Academic Officer on what this dashboard should look like. The board members who are on the academic committee, [they have] an extra responsibility to understand what questions you need

to ask of the school leader and the chief academic officer, and if there's a chief data officer type person, so that those board members are sort of the gatekeeper. They need to help sift through the different levels of data so that the board is getting data that is relevant, succinct enough, but comprehensive enough.

In Washington, D.C., one thing that we do is we have...there's a student data expert at an advocacy organization here in D.C. called Focus, essentially one of the state associations for charter schools here in D.C. They have a student data expert. And we arrange for him to come and give a presentation to every one of our partner boards every year that lets board members see exactly how the students in the school are doing. And he really participates in helping put together that dashboard by providing the data.

To sum up, I would say if there is an outside source of information and if there are data experts at either the state association or another charter school support organization, I would advise involving them and even involving them at the committee level. I would empower your academic committee and make sure you have the right people on your board to serve on and lead that committee to be the first line of pulling together this data. Again, we are working very hard, and I think shortly will be able to provide to the field and to all of you some tools that can give some samples. There's never going to be one template that will work for every board. But we are going to be able to share some structures and some guidelines and some samples that are adaptable for different boards.

TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Great. Thank you. And speaking of committees, we had a couple questions about committees—which wasn't exactly the focus here but thought we would get your take on it as well. And then I will share other

resources with the audience about where they can find advice on this. But do you recommend typical standing committees for boards?

CARRIE IRVIN:

Yes, we do. We recommend the following standing committees, and we recommend that the number of standing committees be as small as possible—not as large as possible—because standing committees require a change in the bylaws if you’re going to add or delete them.

Ad hoc committees, which can be used, for example, a facilities project, a fundraising gala, a school leader search. Those ad hoc committees or task forces can be formed and then disbanded without changing your bylaws.

We recommend that every board have as a standing committee in the bylaws a governance committee [and] an academic or program committee. They go by many different names—academic excellence, program, implementation, et cetera. A finance committee. Usually but not always we recommend a development committee, and that really depends on where your school is and what the context is in your jurisdiction in terms of fundraising for charter schools. If you do want to raise funds, you need a committee in which that goal is housed. If you don’t, then you don’t.

I must tell you that I personally—and I don’t know that we have agreed upon this as an organization in my company—but I personally think that every board should have what I call a head support and evaluation committee. I think that the issue of evaluating and supporting [a] school leader is so critical and is so rarely done well that having a standing committee is a way to ensure that that work gets done well. I also find—we have this committee

on the board that I chaired—and it turns out to be very, very important that the school leader has a small subset of members of the board with whom she has especially close relationships and feels really known by those people and supported by those people. So I myself recommend a head support and evaluation committee.

The committee that I did not mention, you will notice, is an executive committee. I'm not, you know, terribly against an executive committee. But there is a trend in nonprofit governance in general, including charter school governance, away from executive committees. It used to be that we needed to have executive committees because in the event that you needed to convene the board to make a decision in an emergency situation, there had to be a small committee—smaller committee—that was easier to convene, that was authorized to make decisions on behalf of the board as a whole. Well, it is now virtually impossible in an emergency situation to be unable to convene a majority or quorum of the board using electronic means, and you want to make sure that your bylaws allow for that. So that reason for executive committees being no longer is compelling.

What we have found more often than not in charter school governance is the executive committee becomes a board within a board; it becomes kind of an inner group, a cabal, and it becomes a decision-making body that excludes the perspectives of most people on the board. And it leads to really bad in group, out group, disenfranchised obstacle to board cohesiveness. So we actually recommend against an executive committee.

The governance committee for a strong board will have a very empowered governance committee that really is running the board, and which is a lot of what

the executive committee did. So those are our recommendations for standing committees.

TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Great. And this, it's more to a question that's probably [related to the] skill set of board members. But can nonboard members participate on a committee? We had a question about someone who's the treasurer on the finance committee, and potentially other members don't necessarily have that financial expertise to add value. So who to include on that committee?

CARRIE IRVIN:

First I will say that it is really important for the finance committee, just like with the academic committee, to have probably two staff members from the school. We actually don't recommend more than two, but we don't recommend just one. It's not really good practice to have just the school leader on those committees. So for the finance committee you want to have the CFO (chief financial officer) or equivalent position of the school on that committee. On the academic committee, you want to have a chief academic officer so that you have some expertise right there.

It does vary by state. For example, in D.C., the nonprofit law actually changed fairly significantly at the beginning of last year and had some impact on who's allowed to be on the committees of nonprofit boards. So it's important to understand the nonprofit law in your jurisdiction.

We do support the idea of having nonboard members on committees. It is something that has to be done very thoughtfully because (a) there's sensitive information discussed; (b) are you really getting people who can bring the strong wealth and depth and breadth of experience when they don't have a

voting role? I mean there's a question of whether or not you're really going to be able to attract people who can bring enough expertise without in turn making sure that they feel empowered and have a voting role. So all of those, that's my professional opinion on that question.

But my recommendation would be if that is the situation in which you find yourself—you don't have enough members on your board with deep financial expertise—then you should be focusing on board recruiting and looking for people who can bring.... You should have definitely two if not three or four people on your board with reasonably deep financial expertise. You are stewarding millions of dollars of public funds. And only having one person on the board with that expertise is not enough.

TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Yeah. Thank you. And another question was, "Can the PTO (parent teacher organization) president be a board member?" My guess is your answer would be that you have seen that happen, but people should check their governing bylaws and/or any other regulations that are coming from an authorizer or state law to verify the rules around that.

CARRIE IRVIN:

I agree with that. There are definitely going to be rules governing that. But I would also throw in, from a best practice perspective, we advise against it.

We don't advise against parents on the board. In D.C. there are—I mean I know the law varies in all of your jurisdictions. In D.C., every charter school board is required to have at least two current parents—parents of students currently enrolled at the school. So we are absolutely supporters of parents on the board. But what we are not supporters of are elected parents. So if the PTO president, which is typically an

elected position, electing people to a charter school board is not a good idea—parents or otherwise.

At least in D.C., and at least in general nonprofit governance, it may be that there are jurisdictions where it's written into the regulations that boards are elected and may not be aware of that. But in our experience, strong nonprofit boards are independent, self-selecting, and self-perpetuating. And when you introduce elections, you start to introduce all of the problems that we already see in elected school boards in the traditional public school sector.

TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Great. I think from there, we can go on to your examples and then take more questions at the end.

CARRIE IRVIN:

Great. Okay. What I'd like to do is give you three, tell you three short stories: examples of what some of the boards that—these are real boards; I will not name them, but these are real boards that we work very closely with—have done and are doing to focus on improving the quality of their schools.



What have other boards done?

- ▶ Story Number One: Replacing the School Leader
- ▶ Story Number Two: Relinquishing the charter voluntarily
- ▶ Story Number Three: Narrowing the focus to academics

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Story Number 1: It is replacing the school leader. And I talked about that as sort of the least invasive of the challenging and often painful options available to the board of low-performing schools.

One of the schools that we work with...[the] loyal board [was] loyal to the school leader who was a long-time employee at the school. Their school leader

Replacing the School Leader



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left very abruptly several years ago, and the board appointed this long-time school employee as the interim director. They then did a national search to find a new executive director and ended up hiring this interim as the head after a relatively extensive national search.

That was three years ago. Every year since, the achievement at the school, which by the way was already low, has continued to decline. The board itself has continued to get stronger and stronger every year and was very focused on doing everything they could to support this leader. But scores declined year after year, and the problems underlying those declining test scores—poor culture, low caliber of teaching faculty, inadequate professional development, weak leadership, [and] weak leadership team—those problems persisted year after year.

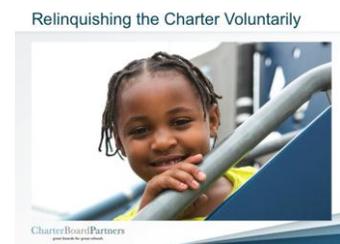
In retrospect what this board realized is that they trusted but did not verify. This school leader was their only source of information. They did not get reports or information from other members of her leadership team or from external organizations. She was very good at presenting and packaging information that highlighted the things that were going well and that highlighted the extremely diligent effort she was making to improve the performance of the school. But without the right information from additional sources, the board was left to basically hope that these interventions that the leader talked about eloquently were working. Finally at the end of this past year, after a 10 percent over two years—a 10 percent decline—in the performance framework score of this school, they finally decided to replace that leader.

I will tell you that this is actually...my other two stories are good stories—hard stories but good stories. This might turn out to be a good story. But, I will tell you, probably I picked this school because this board

waited too long. Scores had declined so much that I am not sure the authorizer in this city has an appetite to give this school a chance and give this new leader a chance. Had the board acted a year ago, things might be very different for the future of this school.

So this is a board that did exercise that option. It was very, very difficult. It was a very courageous thing to do, and they did a good job in hiring a new leader. Had they done that a year ago, this would be a much more optimistic story.

Story Number 2: Very powerful situation in D.C. this past year. The board of a low-performing, persistently low-performing, school with a very compelling and difficult mission found themselves on the closure list. The school was on the closure list, and the board brought in a lot of interventions and a lot of support for the leader.



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Two years ago, that school made double digit gains in test scores. It was the most improved; the school had the most improved test scores in the city that year. They won an award; they got off the closure list. They got out of the lowest tier and into the middle tier, and many people around the city applauded that school for its success.

But the board recognized...that board had a presentation like the one I described a few minutes ago. An outside data expert came in and was able to show the board exactly how the students in the school were doing compared to demographically similar and geographically similar students in other charter schools throughout the city.

That board realized that despite double-digit gains, the absolute performance level in that school was still abysmal. And that school began to do exactly what I laid out earlier. They laid out those, looked at those

three options—I'm sorry, four options—for improving the school. They took that year that they had basically been given because of those double-digit gains and explored what each one of those options would look like: replace the leader, do a turnaround, do a restart, or close the school outright. And at the end of that year, that board decided—very courageously in my opinion—to voluntarily relinquish its charter.

By voluntarily relinquishing the charter, they were able to negotiate a sort of a merger—I don't know really the technical terms—but basically a merger with one of the highest performing charter schools in the city. Any every student in this low-performing, persistently low-performing, school was guaranteed a seat in this high-performing school with which the school had merged.

By not waiting until it was too late, the board was able to negotiate with the authorizer from a position of strength and create an opportunity for these students who had been in this low-performing school to attend one of the highest performing schools in the city, even though many would say they didn't really have to do that. The school had been taken off the closure list.

That is a courageous board. That board looked itself in the mirror and said, none of us should be happy with this level of performance. Though it is higher, it is still terribly low. And it has been so low now for six years, and we are not confident that it will get better.

Story Number 3: This is a school that was also on the closure list. In fact, the school was very close to being closed. At the 11th hour, 11th and a half hour, the school convinced the authorizer to let it try a turnaround. They went this internal turnaround route but added a dimension. They hired an external consultant to do a complete turnaround—internal turnaround—of the school, replacing the school leader and most of the staff. But also they agreed to engineer a board turnaround—not a replacement of the board; it’s the same board with the same charter. But they hired us actually, Charter Board Partners, to come in and reboot the board, transform the board, engineer a transformation of the board.

This was a school with a far-reaching, multilayered, multifaceted mission. The first thing they did was... this external turnaround consultant did the kind of audit that I described earlier in this presentation and gave a very thorough report to the board on everything:

- Culture in every classroom.
- How are teachers being evaluated?
- How often were they receiving feedback through the year?
- How well were all elements of the mission being implemented?

With their deep commitment to keeping that school open and their willingness to take the advice of external consultants, both at the board and the school level, that board engineered an internal turnaround and a reboot of the board. And last year that school saw a 26 percentage point improvement in their test scores.

A big thing, a big reason, all the things I just described: turning around, replacing the leadership, and changing/improving the board and all of those

Narrowing the Focus to Academics



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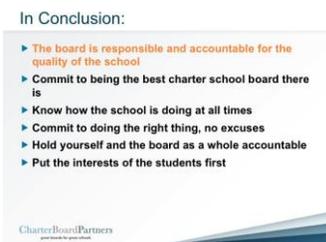
things. But the other thing I wanted to highlight in this story is that board found itself needing to actually change/amend the mission of the school and narrow the focus to academics. So they eliminated some parts of the mission of the school that were related to other important parts of educating children but not clearly focused on academics. By doing all of those things, that school has again successfully rescued itself, and, more importantly, is really providing not yet a great education but certainly a much better education and is well on their way toward significant and sustained improvement. I will—excuse me. I’m sorry—I will conclude and then we can take some more questions.

So in conclusion, I would sum up by saying six things:

1. The board of a charter school is responsible and accountable for the quality of the school and for the quality of the education that every single child attending that school is receiving every day.
2. Commit to being the best charter school board anywhere ever in the world. There’s no reason not to commit to that, and there’s no reason not to aim for it.

Charter school board governance is complicated but not impossible and not actually rocket science. This is something that...nobody wakes up in the morning knowing how to be a great board member. It’s nobody’s hobby; it was nobody’s major in college. So in that sense, it’s complicated.

It’s also really hard to bring together a group of very busy people with very different busy, full lives to come together to do this volunteer work and try to create the cohesion that good boards require. But it is possible and there are lots of tools and resources and information that can tell you how to do it well.



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There's no reason not to aim to do it really well. It's the same amount of time. It's the same time commitment, but channel that time and commitment into working to be the best board there is. The quality of the board directly impacts the quality of the school.

3. Know how the school is doing at all times, and if you don't know, ask. And if you get an answer that your gut tells you is not right and not good enough and not thorough enough, ask again.
4. Commit to doing the right thing even when it is very, very painful. The board that I talked about that relinquished its charter suffered a very painful situation with the leader of that school, who was also its founder. It can be extraordinarily personally painful but not as painful as it is for the children who are sitting in the failing school.
5. Commit to accountability. Hold yourself accountable for being a great board member, devoting the time but more importantly the mental energy, the follow through, the reliability, the hard thinking, the good thinking, preparing for meetings, doing what you say you'll do, [and] going that extra mile. Hold yourself accountable for doing that and hold the board as a whole. Be willing to say, "I don't know that we're all doing everything that we can be doing and are as committed as we need to be to doing it well."
6. Some decisions that are really hard become a little more clear—and sometimes a lot more clear—when you stop and think: If my children were in this school, what decision would I want the board to make? So put the interests of the students first, and sometimes challenging and very complicated decisions become a little bit more clear.

In closing, we ask charter school board members to govern well, be accountable, and exercise the strong and strategic leadership that you have been empowered to exercise by serving on this board because every child deserves the opportunity to attend a great school. And now I [inaudible] Tammie.



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TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Yes, I appreciate this presentation and definitely have a few questions as we end our session over about the next seven minutes or so.

So one question was about educating boards, and I think you talked about this a little bit at the high level. And if there are other specific details you would like to share about educating a board about what is essentially good supervisory practices concerning leaders. And with that, what are some best practices in board gaining insight into cultures, staff satisfaction, et cetera, when they're trying to manage governance versus management?



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CARRIE IRVIN:

Excellent, excellent question. And it's not so easy for boards to get training and tools on this because there's not a lot of great stuff out there, to tell you the truth. We are working on some; the High Bar has some. There are several governance-related organizations that are developing materials. Your authorizer may have some; your state association may have some. I would direct you to take a look at the Charter Board Partners [website](#) and certainly

e-mail me if there's anything that you would like to see more about.

But in terms of supervisory practice, there are resources out there—not a lot—but there are some resources out there in terms of competency-based evaluation for school leaders. In fact, I delivered a presentation on that at the [National Alliance Conference](#), and I'd be happy, Tammie, to send that to you to post for this group. That provides some guidance and support for boards on understanding what the competencies are that they need to be evaluating school leaders on.

I would I guess also point you, to some extent, [BoardSource](#), which is a nonprofit. It supports the boards of nonprofits in general, not just charter schools. It does have some really good stuff—although it's not specific to charter school boards, so it's a little bit less helpful—but good stuff on the balance between governance and management. If you go on our website and look at the standards that I talked very briefly about this afternoon, those standards do encompass what are the different responsibilities of the board and the school leader in each of those strategic areas.

TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

Great. Thank you. Another question was just actually about board size. Is there a[n] optimal board size that you recommend?

CARRIE IRVIN:

That question is very difficult to answer in a national presentation because it is dictated to a large extent by law. So let me give you as specific an answer as I can while still being generic enough to be helpful.

In D.C., the law allows for a maximum of 15 people on a charter school board, of whom two have to be

parents of current students at the school. I will tell you that we, the best schools in D.C.—the highest performing charter schools in D.C.—almost all have boards of either 13 or 15. Bigger boards when they are well run, well organized, and well managed are generally better than smaller boards. Now by bigger I don't mean 50, you know. I mean, I'm talking about...I mean in D.C., you're talking about 13 or 15.

I don't know what the laws are in your states. But so [inaudible] those are the parameters. Five, seven, nine people; that's not enough. It's very, very difficult for me to imagine a scenario where that's a big enough board. Because if you have the standing committees that I just outlined and you have three board members on each one, it's easy to see how that's not enough people. It's hard for a charter school board member to be on more than one committee—or possibly two committees—and be doing a good job.

Charter school boards have a lot of responsibility and do need to be doing a lot of work. If your board is doing nothing but fundraising, you probably don't need 15 people—although you'd probably raise more money—but that's not a strategic charter school board. That's a fundraising board that is probably, you know, either the board of a CMO (charter management organization) or the board of a school with such a strong leader that she purports not to need additional support or advice from the board. We would argue that that board is not really fulfilling all of its responsibilities as a charter school board.

So for a board that is addressing all six standards that I talked about earlier, we rarely see boards that are smaller than—at the very, very smallest—11 that are able to effectively get the work done. There's no doubt, which we hear very often, that the bigger the board gets, the harder it is to get consensus; the

harder it is to become cohesive. But that is the function of making sure that you have the right board chair and that board chair knows how to organize the board and run strategic meetings.

Not knowing how to do those things should not be the reason why you don't have more people on the board. And then, finally, with fewer than 11 people, it's hard to have all of the skills and experience and expertise that boards need, along with, you know, board experience, legal expertise, financial acumen, [and] executive experience. You know, some of the...knowing about the field of education. Those are some of the more commonly known areas of expertise you want to have on your board.

We also, there are some under, often, there's some overlooked areas of expertise that we find are enormously helpful, for example, PR (public relations), marketing, [and] communications. Those are great, important skills to have on charter school boards. HR (Human resources) is another really important skill. You know, the board is responsible for managing the school leader, even though the board is made up of volunteers. Having an HR professional on the board can be enormously helpful. And that person can also support the school leader in understanding how to hire well and evaluate her leadership team and her staff. So it's very hard with fewer than 11 to 13 people to have all of the skills and experience that you need.

TAMMIE KNIGHTS:

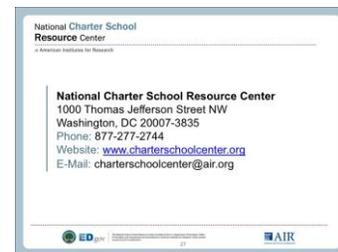
Great. Thank you, Carrie. And with that said, I will say thank you to Carrie as well as to all of our participants for engaging so much throughout this presentation. And we definitely hope that this was useful to you.

As you saw in the chat, you are welcome to reach out to Carrie or to their website at Charter Board Partners or the National Charter School Research Center website that has a whole section on board governance and additional resources.

And with that, I'm going to put up a brief survey for you all. If you could kindly fill that out so we can make sure that we are providing you the most useful resources for your needs. Have a great [day].



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