

Application Phase Scenario

Auburn Charter School	
Alternative High School, Expeditionary Learning	Funding: \$7,650 per pupil/75% of state average per pupil
Second year of operation	Legal status: Part of a Local Education Agency (LEA)
Target population: High school students from 5 local districts located within 25 miles of the school.	Governance: Independent Board of Directors (n=9)
Total Enrollment: 75 students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 students with IEPs • 5 students who formally had IEPs 	Facility: 5 classrooms located on the third floor of a surplus LEA owned middle school. Cost: \$30,000 a year

A group of enthusiastic local educators who had identified an overlooked student population—students who did not fit into the local comprehensive high schools—created Auburn Charter School (ACS). ACS founders hoped to attract a wide array of students who for a variety of reasons, were not interested or had not been successful in a large comprehensive high school. The mission of the school is to create a small and highly individualized learning community where all students could find their learning niche absent the pressure often present in larger comprehensive high schools. In the charter application, the school founders had signed assurances to comply with all state and federal laws; including those pertaining to educating students with disabilities.

- Reflecting the clear need for an alternative high school option in the region, the school opened its doors with 55 students and successfully grew to its target of 75 by the end of the first year.
- 15 of the students had active IEPs or had exited their IEPs as part of the process of departing their neighborhood high school.
- Three of the seven original board members had left the board due to the unexpectedly large time commitment associated with starting a new school. The board is actively recruiting new members.
- After the school's application was approved but before the school opened, the superintendent from the district in which the school is physically located, and which the founding board had relied on for support, retired. The new superintendent is not knowledgeable about charter schools and generally suspicious of them for unspecified reasons.
- In ACS' first year of operation, the young and idealistic founding principal became immediately overwhelmed with the herculean task of starting a charter school. While he devoted a great deal of energy to starting the school, after eight months he announced his resignation. The original principal accomplished a lot but there were many details that were not attended to during the first year. Of note, the founding principal who had limited knowledge of special education attempted to provide the services outlined on students' IEPs and made preliminary inquiries to the districts of residence for assistance but had not been able to get any traction with the districts to provide the services as had been anticipated when the school applied for its charter.

- Entering its second year of operation with a new and experienced principal, the school was struggling on multiple fronts but most urgently; it was struggling to comply with federal and state special education requirements.
- Three of the districts of residence had assigned a caseworker to each of the students with IEPs who attend ACS but interactions had been limited and largely inadequate.
- Two of the districts did not provide any support to the students with IEPs who enrolled in ACS.
- Inquiries from the new principal to the five sending districts had resulted in mixed responses ranging from:
 - Local district special education director is unclear about what a charter school is and is not aware of any obligation on the part of her division to provide services;
 - Services are available if the students want to return to the neighborhood high school; to
 - Students exited special education when they left the neighborhood school so regardless of who is responsible, the students do not require services.
- Twelve weeks into his tenure, the new principal is struggling to lead the school while fighting with multiple school districts to provide services to students in the school.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the key challenges the current principal is facing?
- What factors may be compounding the challenges?
- What steps could the founders of ACS and the authorizer have taken during the application process to avoid the current situation?

Operation Phase Scenario

Fields Charter Academy (FCA) is a 5-12 charter school with a science focus that operates as its own LEA. FCA is in its third year of operation and enrolls 450 students. The state charter school funding formula is relatively equitable and charter schools receive 100% of the per pupil allocation that traditional public schools receive. The state also has a robust special education funding formula that provides all public schools, including charter schools, with significant reimbursement for special education costs that exceed 150% of the average per pupil allocation costs. Eight percent of FCA's students have active IEPs.

FCA has a detailed student application process designed to target students interested in science. The application asks all students to provide detailed information about their education history and interests, including whether or not they have or have ever had an IEP. There is a great deal of interest in FCA in the community given the science focus but many students elect not to complete the application process. The school generally operates at capacity but to date it has not had to select students by lottery.

FCA is committed to full-inclusion and offers very limited pull-out services for students with disabilities. The school contracts with an external provider to train teachers to differentiate instruction, provide accommodations, and collaborate with special education teachers employed by the provider.

In its first three years of operation, the school has performed very well on state assessments except for the sub-group of students with disabilities. The authorizer has met with the principal and the special education provider to discuss concerns about the performance of students with disabilities. The principal and the special education provider have assured the authorizer that FCA is providing effective special education and related services but argued that the state assessment is not an accurate reflection of the progress they have made with their students with disabilities. In fact, they argue that upwards of 15% of their population actually have disabilities but the school's curriculum and instruction is so effective, only 8% of the students—those with more severe disabilities—have formal IEPs. The authorizer has heard on the grapevine that the word in the community is that the school offers a strong academic program but is not able to provide services to students with disabilities except for those with minor learning disabilities.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the key challenges the authorizer is facing?
- What factors are compounding the challenges?
- What steps could the authorizer take to address the current situation?

Renewal Phase Scenario

Sandwich Charter Middle School (SCMS) is in its fourth year of operation and is scheduled to host a representative from its authorizer for a two-day site visit that is part of the renewal process. SCMS is a relatively traditional public school, it adopted the curriculum offered by the local district and works closely with the LEA, of which it is a part, to ensure that students can progress from the traditional elementary and then onto the single high school in the district. The school enrolls 200 students. On average, students at SMCS perform slightly above average on state assessments but its student population does not reflect the local district. The school enrolls notably fewer students who receive free and reduced meals and whereas the other district schools enroll 13-17% students with disabilities, only 4% of SCMS's population has IEPs.

Prior discussions with SCMS's principal and board chair have identified the lack of diversity at the school to be a concern but the authorizer has not proactively documented the issue or explored the potential underlying causes influencing the schools' demographics. However, the authorizer has recently received one formal complaint and two informal complaints regarding the school's application materials and discipline policies that do not appear to fully support inclusion of students with disabilities at SCMS. Specifically, the authorizer has recently learned that a student for which there was emerging concern about an emotional disability was recently expelled due to recurring behavior problems. When pressed about the complaints and the material concerns, the school principal explained that the charter school is not equipped to effectively educate all students and that while open to some students with disabilities, enrolling students with a diverse array of disabilities is not feasible due to the school's focus, size, and funding structure.

Discussion Questions:

- As the authorizer contemplates renewing the schools charter, what challenge are they facing?
- What factors are compounding the challenges?
- What steps could the authorizer have taken during the application and operation phases to avoid the current situation?
- How should the authorizer incorporate the information into the renewal process?