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CHARTER SCHOOL  
RESOURCE CENTER

# Preparing, Preventing, and Responding to Stave Off Distress in Charter Schools

*A Workshop for School Leaders and Board Members*

Virtual | Zoom

[charterschoolcenter.ed.gov](https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov)

# About the NCSRC

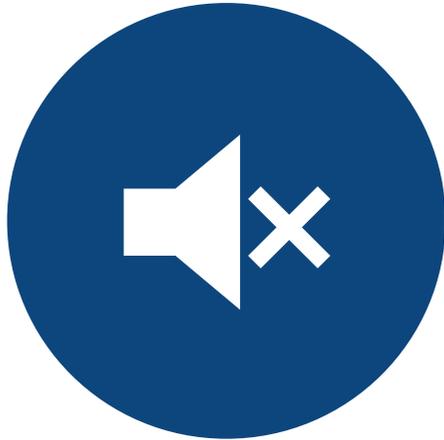
The National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) provides technical assistance to federal grantees and resources supporting charter sector stakeholders. NCSRC is funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and managed by Manhattan Strategy Group (MSG) in partnership with WestEd.



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## Norms for Discussion



Remember to mute yourself



Utilize the chat for questions  
and comments



Respond to the survey



*This session is being recorded, so you and your peers may access it at a later date.*

# On the Webinar Today



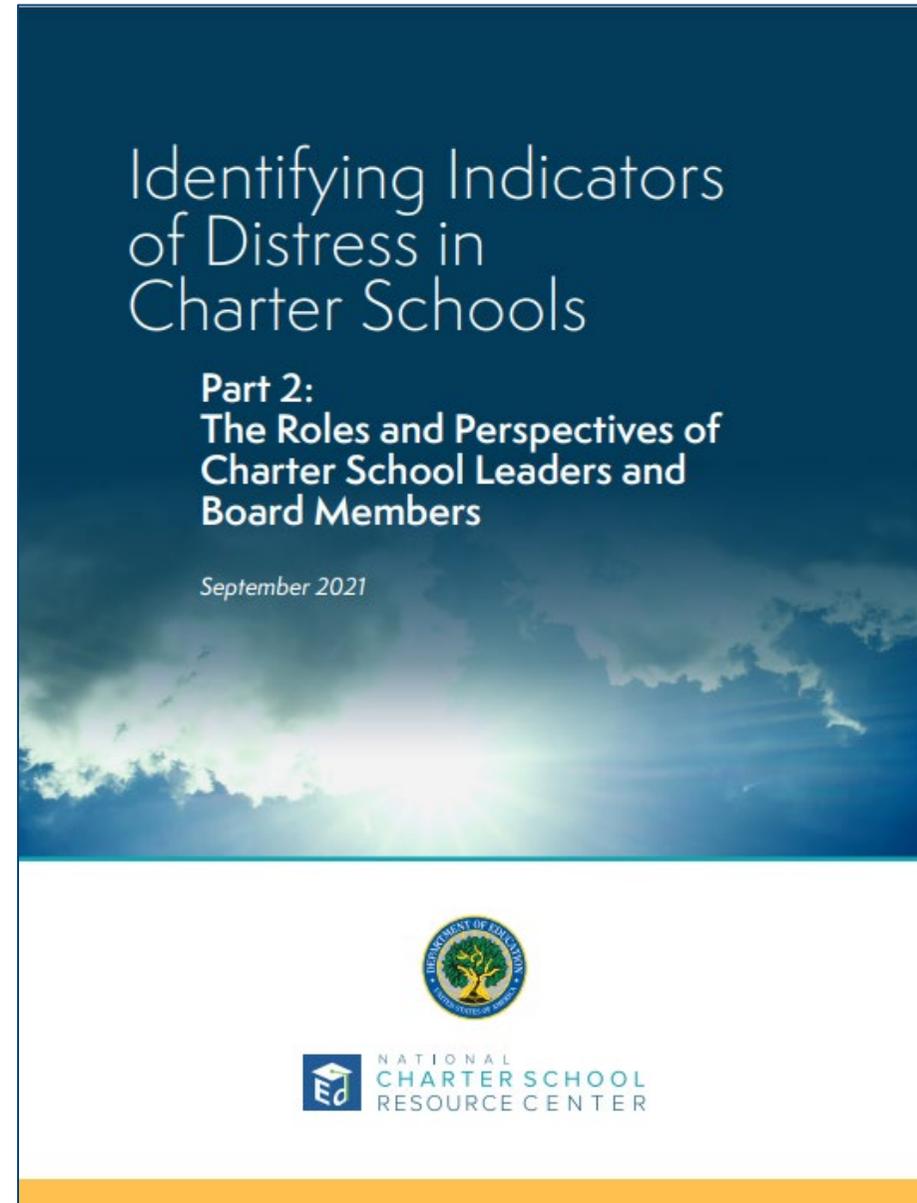
**Aimee Evan, PhD**  
National Charter School  
Resource Center



**Hannah Sullivan**  
National Charter School  
Resource Center

This session is based on a new research report from the National Charter School Resource Center.

<https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/publication/identifying-indicators-distress-charter-schools-part-2-roles-and-perspectives-charter>



## Today's Big Question



How can we identify whether our school is falling off track and help get them back on track?



# Session Objective

To provide schools and governing boards with knowledge and tools to help them stave off distress in their schools by understanding the importance of identifying distress early and creating systems, processes, and procedures to prevent or mitigate potential stressors.

# Agenda



Why should leaders and board members be aware of indicators of distress?

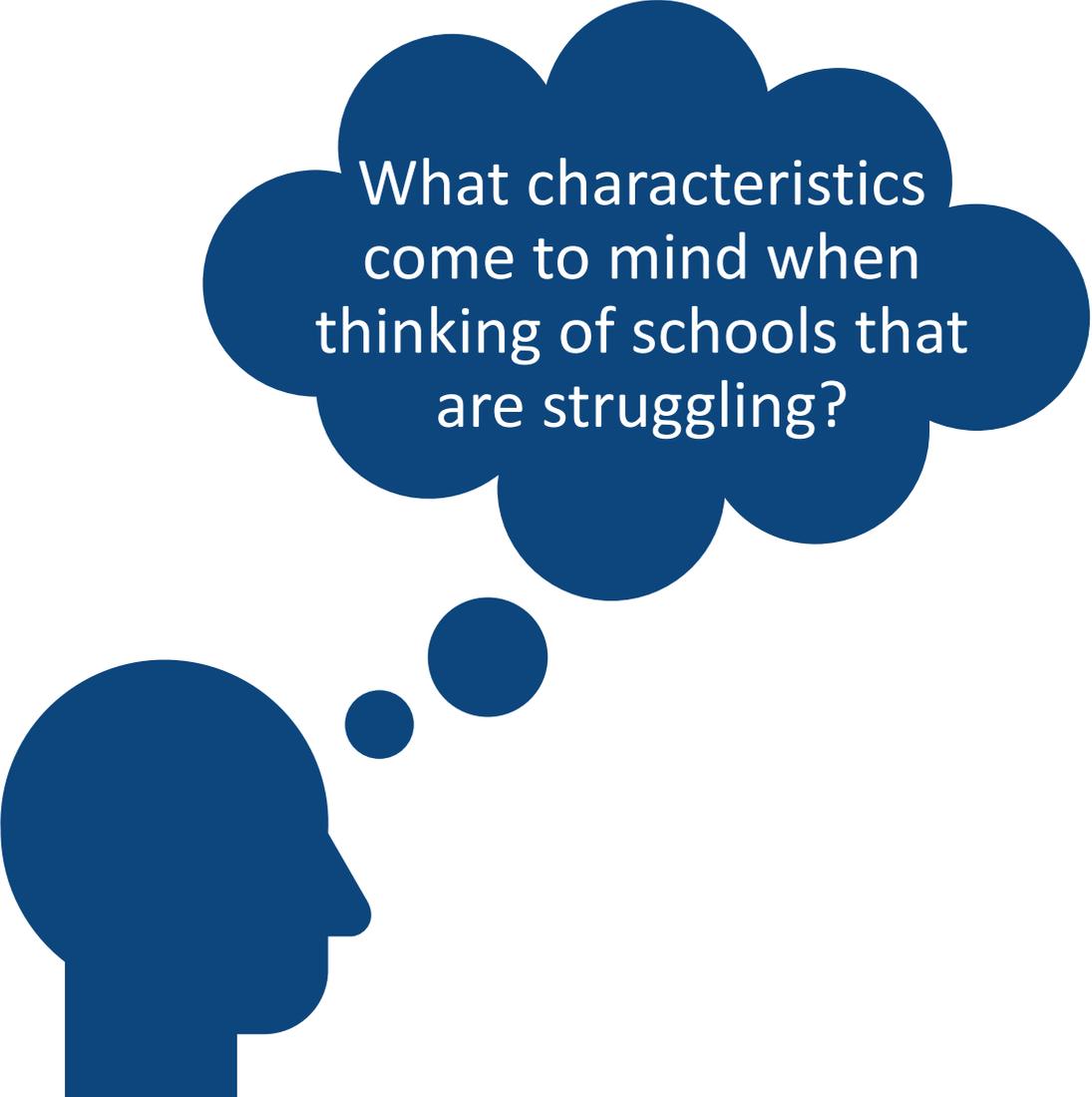


What are indicators of distress?



How can indicators of distress be used to get schools back on track to success?

## Guiding Question



What characteristics  
come to mind when  
thinking of schools that  
are struggling?

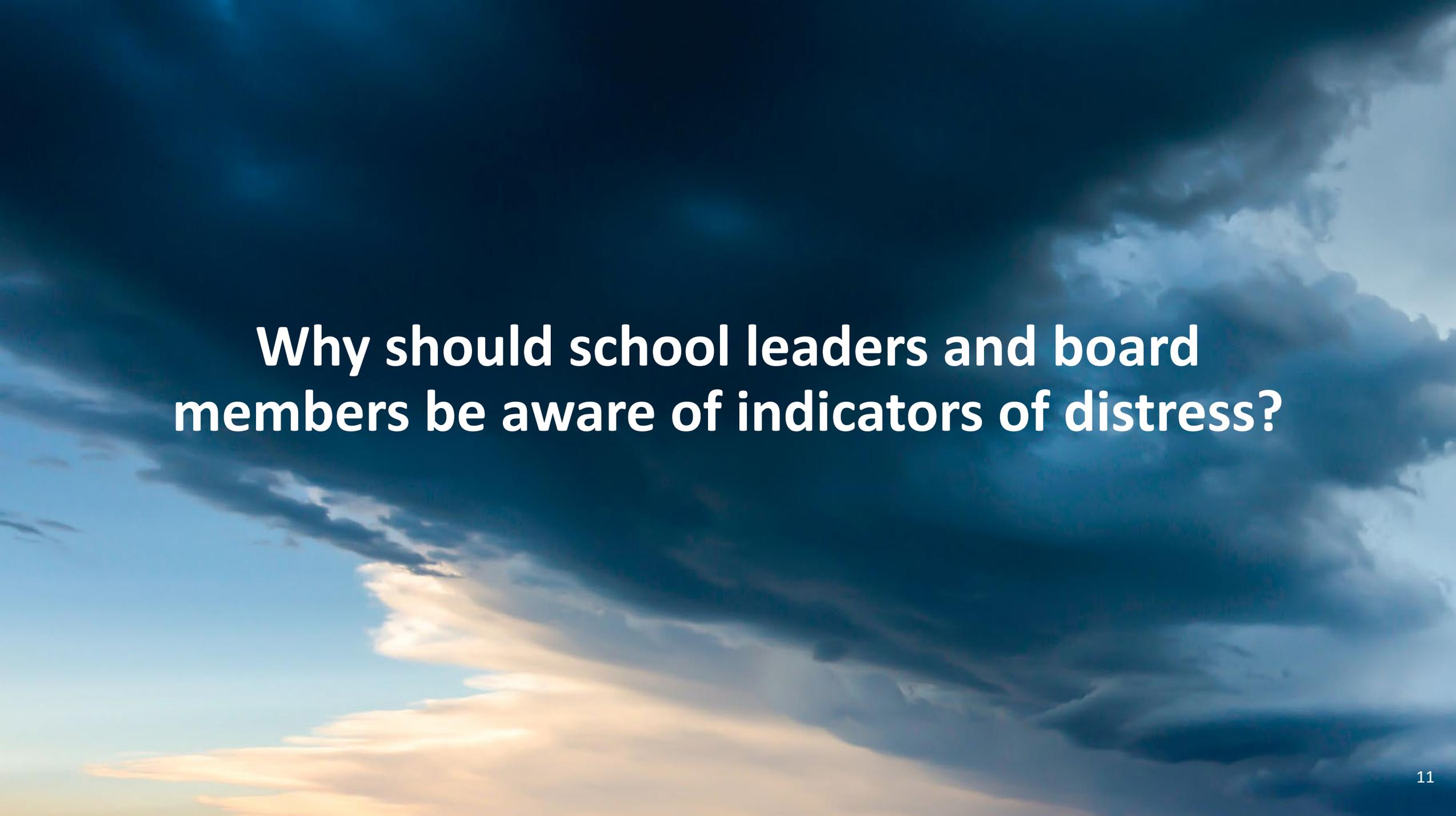
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# What characteristics come to mind when thinking of schools that are struggling?





**Why should school leaders and board members be aware of indicators of distress?**

## Why Are We Studying Indicators of Distress



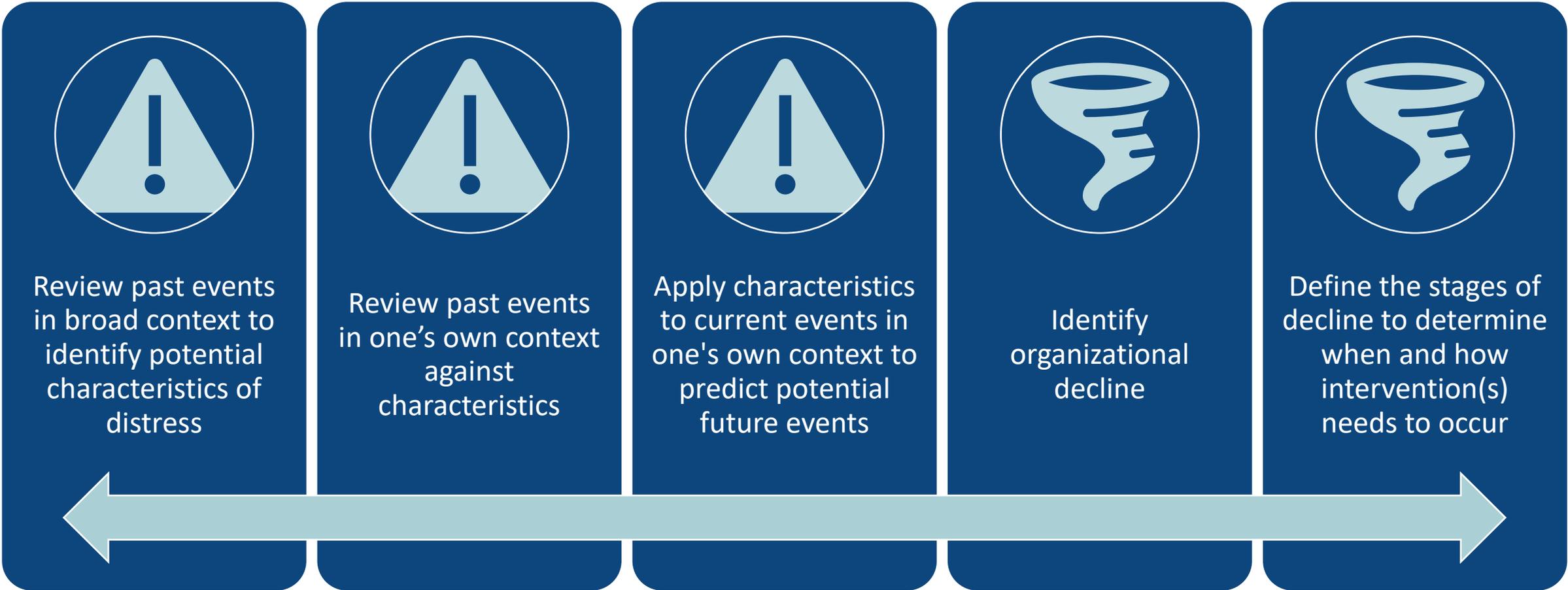
School closure as an improvement strategy bore out mixed short- and long-term effects for displaced students.

High cost and low track record of success of comprehensive school improvement efforts meant students were in low-performing schools for too long.

Identifying struggling schools early and addressing issues before they fester, increases the odds that:

- Resources, such as time, effort, and funds, are used efficiently
- Schools are closed as a last resort
- Students have equitable access to high-quality options

# Early Warning Systems and Death Spiral



## When Used Together...



Indicators can help identify schools in distress *and* determine the type of intervention(s) necessary ***prior to school failure and negative impact on students.***



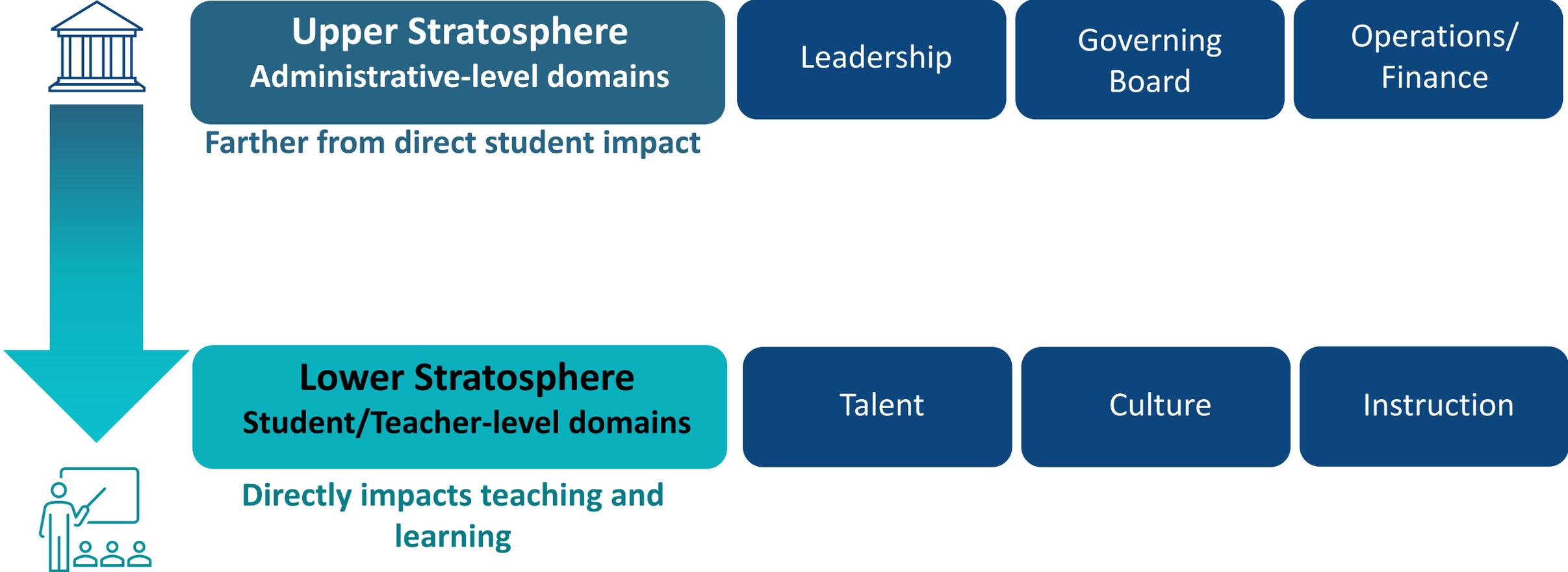
# What are Indicators of Distress?

## Indicators of Distress

Data signaling that a school's performance is declining in a number of areas.



# Beyond the Stratosphere



# Leadership Indicators

Inability to execute systems to address school needs

Overextended leadership

Defensive or suspicious leadership

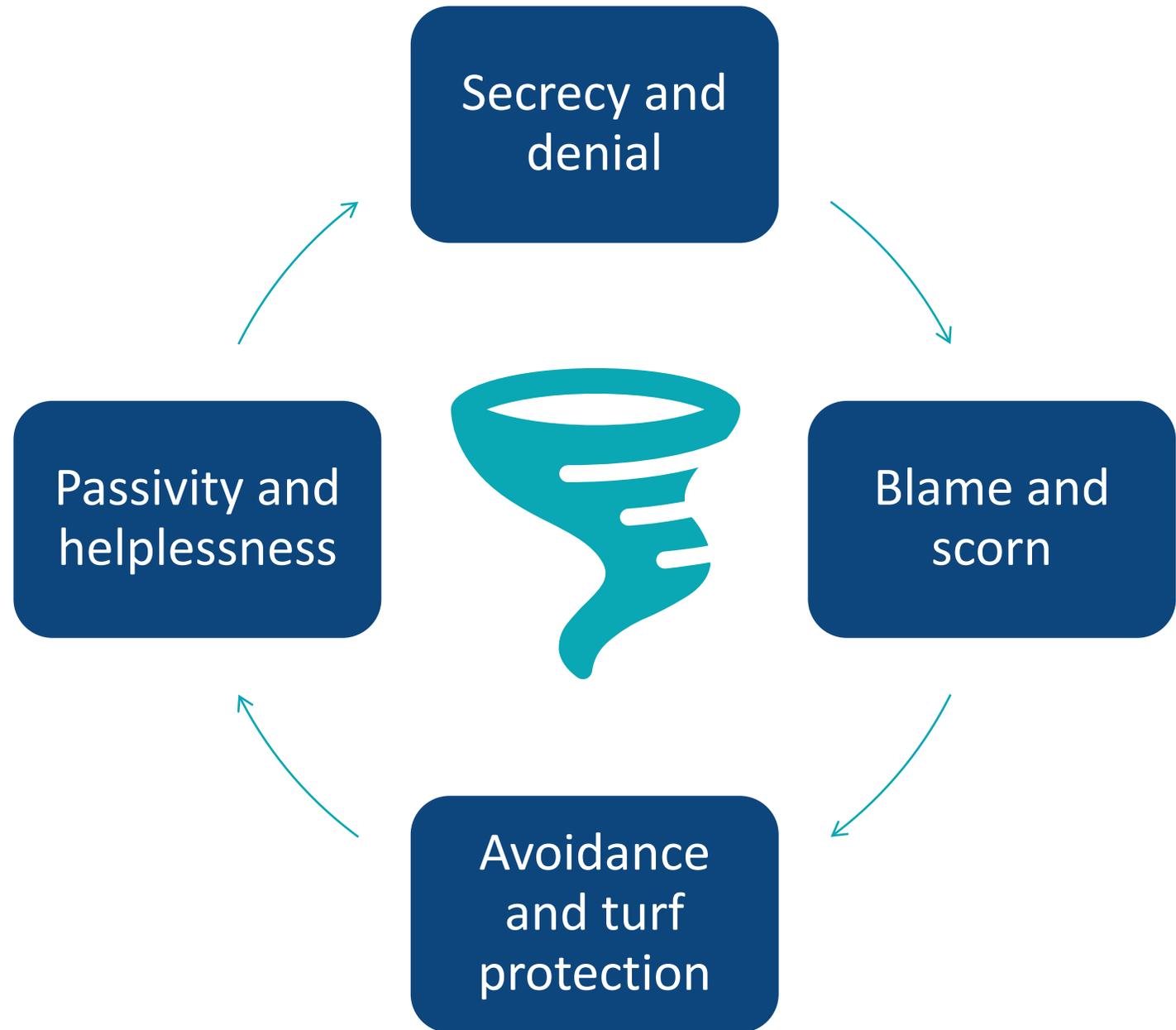
*Networked Schools:*  
Stunted ability to address school needs

## What might this look like?

**Inability to execute systems to address school needs:** Schools that struggled had challenges aligning their vision, mission, and goals with systems to execute, such as an academic strategy, enrollment strategy, financial planning, staff retention approach, and culture development.

“I think there was a big picture, but there weren’t any steps on how to get to that big picture.”

# Leadership “Death Spiral”



Source: Kantor, 2003

# Governance Indicators



## What might this look like?

**Out of touch with school population needs:** Without engagement with the students, staff, and families affiliated with the school, board members were unaware of the needs of the school and the community. Boards that did not understand the needs of the school also often had difficulty hiring a leader with the competencies to address those needs.

“I think what really happened is the board placed a school leader in the role that was somebody the kids and parents liked as a person, but [had] low or no experience actually turning around a school.”

# Operations/Finance



Fragile Enrollment



Absence of systems to maintain financial viability



Poor budget management and spending decisions



Network Schools: Lack of fiscal autonomy at the school level

## What might this look like?

**Absence of systems to maintain financial viability:** Schools that struggled financially often operated without a system or strategy to set and achieve financial targets. For example, struggling schools often lacked internal controls, processes to track and forecast finances and enrollment, and strategies to boost financial health.

“We walked into that fiscal year with close to \$800,000 in the current budget on a \$3-million-budget shortfall. That was the spiral, because literally nobody was tracking enrollment. Nobody could tell how many kids were there.”

# Talent



Pattern of teacher turnover



Declining staff capacity



Lack of systems to develop and sustain capacity

## What might this look like?

**Lack of systems to develop and sustain capacity:** Staff and the programs to support them are often underprioritized and underdeveloped in schools experiencing distress. One leader described the connection between talent and leadership in understanding the importance of developing staff.

“Our talent pool is a lot of newer teachers, so it was incumbent upon us to do professional development with folks, and we just didn’t.”

# Culture



Chaotic student culture



Discontented staff culture



Weak family and community connection

## What might this look like?

**Chaotic student culture:** Struggling schools often had an environment of low expectations for students or an unsafe or hostile student environment.

“You can be in a building for about an hour and get a sense of the level of safety in the building. Some of that is how many kids are in classes, how many kids are in the hallways doing whatever they want to do, how many kids are supervised, and what types of incidents are happening there.”

# Instruction



Lack of curriculum alignment with standards and across grade levels



No systems to support high-quality instruction



*Networked Schools:* misaligned instructional decisions



Absence of systems for sufficient student supports

## What might this look like?

### **No systems to support high-quality instruction:**

Schools showing signs of decline exhibited an absence of instructional supports, such as professional development around consistent curriculum implementation, a system for data-informed instruction, feedback cycles for teachers, and delegation of responsibilities so teachers had the time and effort to devote to delivering high-quality instruction.

“My first couple years, as a teacher, I was pulling information from the [internet]. And there was no professional development. I didn't know if I was even implementing what they had designed.”



**How can Indicators of Distress be used to  
get schools back on track to success?**

# Caselets



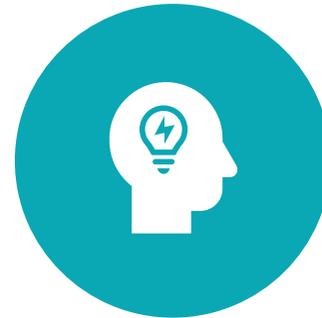
What are the issues you see at this school?



What help might this school need



How detrimental are these issues to the health of this school?



If this school was under your leadership, what would you do?



**How can school leaders and governing boards  
use indicators of distress?**

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# How can school leaders and governing boards use indicators of distress?

operations development  
pivot when needed  
address challenges  
review strategic plan  
setting improvement goals  
reflection  
warnings  
connect 2 leadership evals  
teacher surveys  
rework plans  
early intervention  
early warning systems  
reviewing leadership  
evaluate board policies  
restructuring  
change leader  
review at board meetings  
build a realistic plan  
strategic plan  
routine timely  
accountability for leader  
lag and lead indicators

# Staving off distress takes *preparedness, prevention, and response.*





**Finding 1: Schools that build robust systems to withstand distress are more *prepared* to weather it successfully.**

Systems provide a backbone and intentionality to the school's operations, reducing confusion, unknowns, and opportunities for issues to go unaddressed and spiral into deeper decline.



**Finding 2: Not all challenges stem from within the school walls. Schools that were able to anticipate shifts in their environment were better able to *prevent* decline.**

Not just internal crises tipped schools off kilter. Environmental challenges also posed threats to schools' sustainability. Schools that anticipate changes or challenges in their environment were better able to prevent and mitigate these challenges.

# Effects Beyond the Stratosphere



**Above the Stratosphere**

Reputation

Market

Authorizer

**Above the Stratosphere**

Leadership

Governing Board

Operations/  
Finance

**Below the Stratosphere**

Talent

Culture

Instruction





**Finding 3: Schools with the ability to pivot in *response* to challenges were better positioned for sustainability.**

Schools able to pivot when faced with challenges were better able to overcome them.

## Want to Go Deeper on the Indicators of Distress?



Put the  
Indicators  
into Practice

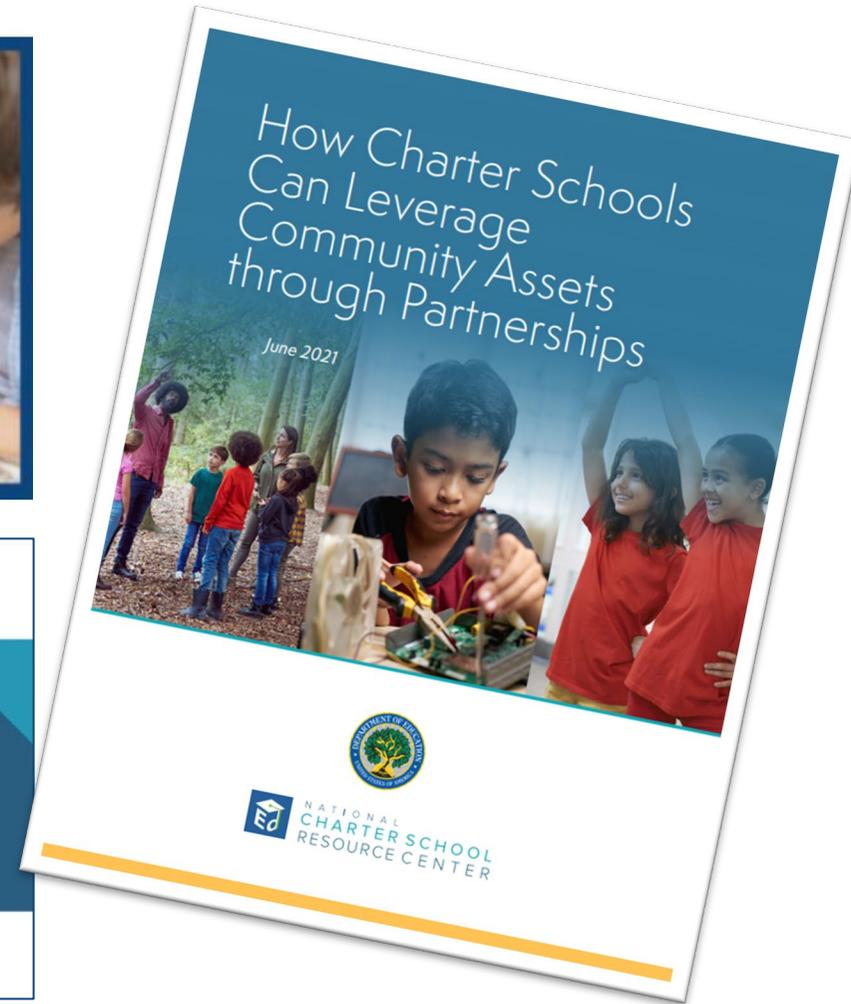
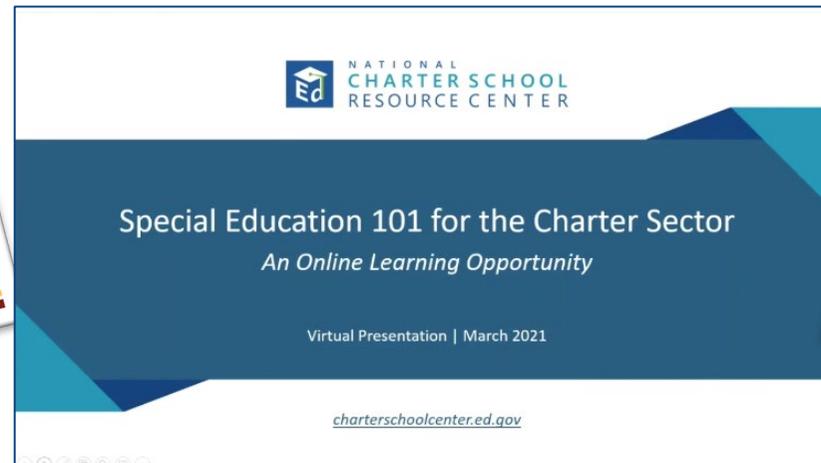
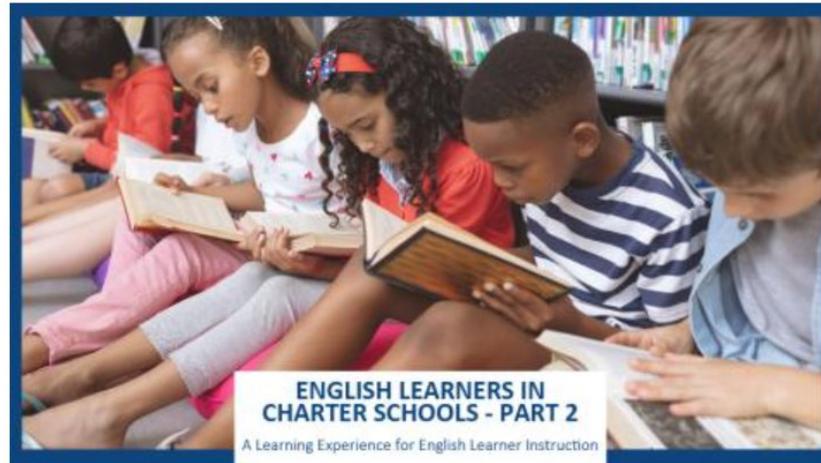
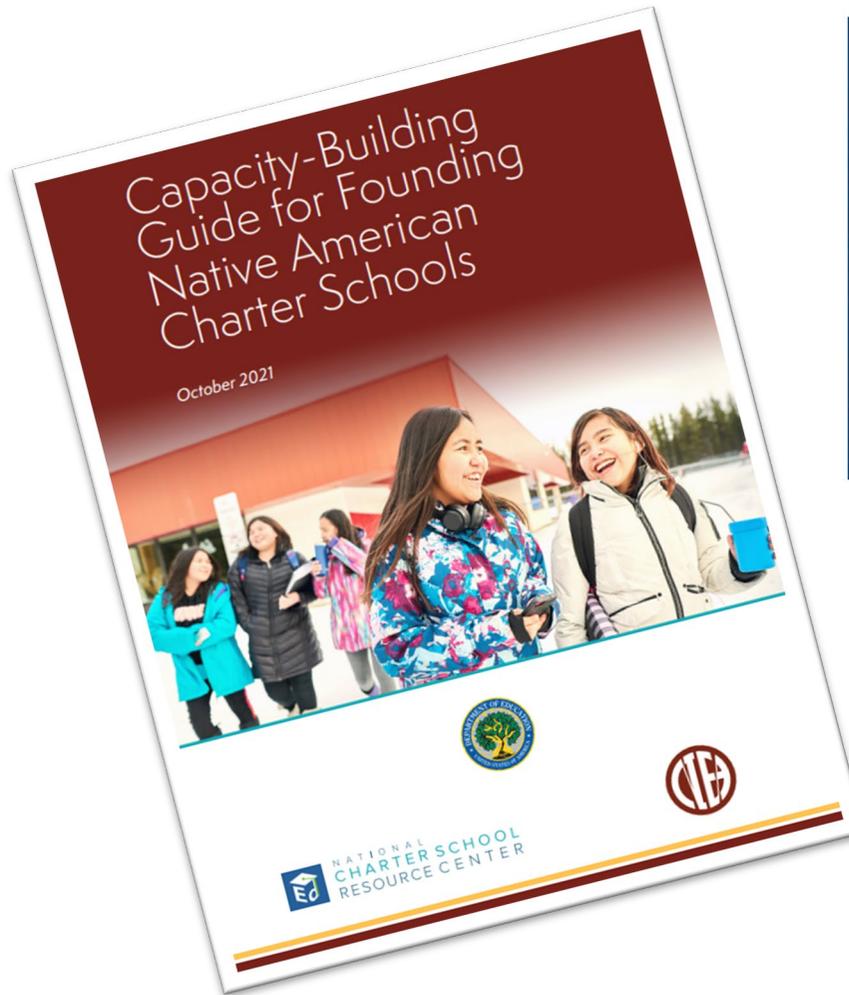
Pre-recorded discussion prompts to help your team and governing board prepare, prevent, and respond to potential distress events.

Peer-to-peer session to further discuss challenges and solutions to using the indicators in practice.

# Q&A



# Recently Released NCSRC Virtual Events & Resources



## How can you contact us?



[charterschoolcenter.ed.gov](http://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov)



[contact-us@charterschoolcenter.org](mailto:contact-us@charterschoolcenter.org)



**THANK YOU!**

