



Charter Districts

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Key Questions for District Leaders in Creating and Supporting Charter Districts

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An emerging governance phenomenon across the country is the creation of all-charter districts – school districts that are composed entirely or primarily of charter schools or contract schools. As an increasing number of district leaders grapples with this complex issue, the key questions that need to be answered are becoming clearer. The purpose of this document, and an accompanying document geared toward state leaders, is to ask those key questions.

Later this year, the National Center on Governing America's Schools at the Education Commission of the States, in partnership with Public Impact, will produce two reports offering potential answers to these questions. These efforts are funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Public Charter Schools Program, and are focused on helping state and district leaders move forward in their attempts to significantly redesign K-12 public education systems.

Planning and Getting Started

Creating a Vision and Goals

Is there a clear vision of what the district is trying to accomplish by becoming an all-charter district?

What specific goals does the district hope to achieve by moving in this direction? Are there certain problems it hopes to solve and changes it plans to make?

Within an all-charter district, what strategies do district leaders plan to use in solving problems and making changes that cannot be implemented in a traditional district environment?

What are the student achievement goals for the district as it moves to become an all-charter district? What are other goals for the district as it moves in this direction (e.g., principal, teacher and parent empowerment)?

How will progress toward these goals be measured and evaluated?

Preparing for the Transformation Process

Assessing the Environment

Is the district required by state law or policy to follow an established process for becoming an all-charter district? Will the district have to enter into an agreement with the state to become an all-charter district?

Will the district's movement to becoming an all-charter district require the district to ask the state to waive certain rules and regulations that affect the responsibilities of school boards and superintendents? If so, what rules and regulations need to be waived, and what is the process for obtaining these waivers?

What kind of process will the district use to gauge and gain support in the community for transformation? Will there be a required minimum percentage of support among voters or among specific groups, such as school board members, principals, teachers and parents?

What are some of the anticipated challenges in becoming an all-charter district?

Does the district have the financial and leadership resources necessary to meet those challenges successfully and guide the district through the implementation and operation of an all-charter district?

Establishing the Transformation Process

What are the anticipated roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders at the local level during the transformation process (i.e., superintendent, central office staff, school board, unions, principals, teachers, parents, students, local school councils, general public)?

Will the district convert existing schools to charter or contract schools all at once or incrementally?

If incrementally, what will be the conversion process (e.g., a certain number or percentage of the schools will convert each year), and over what period of time (e.g., three years)?

How will the district determine which schools to convert at each stage of the process? Will this be determined based on level of performance at the school (e.g., the higher the performers, the earlier the conversions) or level of interest at the school (e.g., the higher the level of interest, the earlier the conversions) or other factors?

Will staff at converted schools remain in place, or will schools re-hire after conversion?

Will the district allow new starts, as well as conversions?

Constructing the Application Process

How will the district ensure that the supply of schools matches the community's needs (e.g., survey community leaders, employers, parents and students to determine their needs; issue request for proposals to establish schools that serve these needs; consider unsolicited proposals for schools when applicants demonstrate sufficient community interest)?

What criteria will the district use for approving proposals for conversion or start-up schools?

What proposal-review processes will the district establish?

Will the district offer special incentives for schools to operate in low-income areas and serve primarily disadvantaged students?

Will the district require groups operating more than one school within the district to run a specified number of schools in low-income or otherwise disadvantaged areas?

Will the district encourage the establishment of "recovery schools" to help suspended and expelled students master academic skills and habits so they can return to regular schools?

What entity will hold the charter or contract for each school?

How will this entity be formed initially? What kind of legal status will it have?

What constraints will be placed on how it can change structurally over time?

Re-envisioning the District

Creating Opportunities To Perform

Outlining Key Stakeholders' Roles and Responsibilities

What are the main roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders (i.e., superintendent, central office staff, school board, unions, principals, teachers, parents, students, local school councils and community members)?

How will the district operate differently from traditional districts concerning various central functions such as finance, management and staff recruitment, professional development and retention?

What services will the district provide to schools in an all-charter district?

What will be the process to move from the current set of services to the new set of services?

Will schools pay for services from the district? If so, how?

Will schools be required to use district services? If not, from what alternative providers may they receive services?

What challenges does the district anticipate as it moves to providing a new set of services? How might these challenges be met?

What capacity issues, in terms of skills and abilities of district staff, must be addressed in order for district staff to perform in an all-charter district?

Restructuring District and School Authority

Human Resources

Who will hire, evaluate and fire principals, teachers and other staff at each school?

Who will determine the salaries at each school?

Who will determine the staffing structures at each school?

Who will make decisions about professional development for principals, teachers and other school staff?

Will the district recruit and educate a variety of individuals for principal and teacher positions, including traditional and nontraditional applicants?

Will each school in the district have to abide by collective-bargaining agreements with teachers', administrators' and other unions? If so, will the district's movement to becoming an all-charter district require changes in these agreements? If so, what changes will be necessary, and what is the process for bringing about these changes?

School Programs

Who will choose the curriculum and instructional approaches to be used at each school?

Will the district require that schools cover certain core subjects?

Who will decide how to allot time at each school, in terms of before-school programs, start time, length of class periods, end time, after-school programs and the annual school calendar?

Financial Resources

Who will create and manage each school's budget?

What restrictions will be placed on schools' budgetary decisions?

Will schools be allowed to raise private money? Will there be a limit on such fundraising?

Compliance Requirements

How will special education be handled in the all-charter district?

What other compliance requirements will remain in force for schools in the district?

Creating Incentives To Perform

School-Level Accountability

Will the district employ both general standards and indicators that are applied to every school, and specific standards that are applied on a school-by-school basis? If so, who will determine the general standards and indicators that will be applied to each school for the purposes of accountability?

What assessments will the district require the school to administer, and to whom?

How will schools be held accountable for results?

Will the district conduct value-added analysis of student test scores in each of its schools?

Will the district require school-level data to be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, income level, language proficiency and special education?

What incentives and sanctions will exist to promote achievement?

What happens to a school in the event of chronic underperformance?

Will the district be willing to close schools or impose other consequences if schools fail to meet goals? Is there a system in place that can fairly evaluate programs and provide recommendations concerning the performance of each school?

District-Level Accountability

How will the district report school-by-school results to the public, especially to parents if public school choice is allowed and supported in the district?

How will the district report progress toward goals to the public?

School Choice

How will the district address school choice?

If the transformation to an all-charter district is incremental, will each school, at each stage of the process, be open to any eligible student in the district? If not, how will enrollment work?

Does the state have an interdistrict open-enrollment policy? If so, how will students transferring from other districts be incorporated in the enrollment process?

Will the district require schools to engage in fair student admission practices and forbid student expulsions except for cause?

Creating Capacity To Perform

Financial Resources

How will money flow to the schools? What formula will dictate this flow of money? Will this be handled on a per-pupil basis, and will the per-pupil funding amounts be weighted to reflect differences in students based on poverty, language proficiency and special education? Which weights will be assigned to which students?

Will the central office retain any money? If so, how much and for what purposes?

How will student transportation be funded and managed in the district (e.g., as one component of the

transportation policy, provide means-tested transportation vouchers to student)?

How will school facilities be funded and managed in the district?

Leadership and Human Resources

What capacity issues, in terms of skills and abilities, must be addressed in order for district staff to perform well in an all-charter district?

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What steps will the district take to generate a continuous supply of high-quality leadership at the district and school levels?

This document was completed by Bryan Hassel, director, Public Impact, and Todd Ziebarth, policy analyst, ECS National Center on Governing America's Schools, with financial support from the U.S. Department of Education's Public Charter Schools Program.

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