



COLORADO LEAGUE of
CHARTER SCHOOLS

focus on achievement

CHECKLIST OF KEY APPLICATION COMPONENTS

A *Clear and Concise* **Executive Summary**

A strong Executive Summary is a succinct overview of the key components of the charter application for the proposed school. The Summary should be a stand-alone document and articulate a clear description of the school as planned, its organizing entity (i.e., design team), and a cogent vision along with essential academic goals. The Executive Summary should not exceed 5 pages.

The Executive Summary should concisely set forth:

- a **Mission Statement** that is clear and focused on measurable educational outcomes;
- a **Vision** that describes why the school is being created;
- the need for the school and the impact the school is intended to have;
- the school's grade structure, from inception to full enrollment;
- the proposed location (i.e., community/neighborhood and type of building in which the school will operate);
- the target population or community(ies), (i.e., anticipated demographics and characteristics of the students);
- the design team's history and record of success in operating other schools (if applicable);
- an overview of the **Educational Program**;
- essential **SMART Performance Goals** (see below) for academic performance;
- major educational service contracts, partnerships or affiliations; and
- the governance structure and initial leadership of the school.

Meaningful and Measurable **Academic and Operational Goals**

Goals should be **S.M.A.R.T.** – *Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Reflect the Mission, and Time-Specific.*

SMART goals reflect an understanding of the targeted student population and align with the vision, mission, and educational philosophy of the school, state standards, and the overall accountability/assessment plan for the school. SMART goals also demonstrate that the school is dedicated to high academic achievement, successful and measurable student outcomes, and accountability for results. Note: The school design team, leadership and governing board should recognize that goals stated in the charter application are preliminary – based on assumptions about the student population to be served – and may well need to be revised or refined once the school knows its population and has collected baseline achievement data.

(See accompanying “**Developing Performance Goals and Measures**” guidance, which includes, at the end, a detailed sample of a well-developed goal and accompanying information for an accountability plan. New school developers should follow the general format of the sample for stating goals, targets and measures, though the content of the application need not be as detailed as the sample. The sample also outlines steps that new schools should eventually follow when integrating every goal stated in the application into a full-fledged accountability plan.)

In addition to academic performance, the application should also state key goals for the operational performance of the school (i.e., in areas such as fiscal management and fundraising, and parental/community engagement). These goals should also be consistent with the vision, mission and educational philosophy of the school.

A Sound Educational Program

Charter school applications must meet specific, detailed requirements for describing the proposed school’s education program. An application should demonstrate that:

- the educational program is appropriate for and likely to be successful with the targeted student population, based on research or other clear evidence demonstrating success with similar student populations;
- the curriculum is aligned with Colorado State Standards;
- the design team has the knowledge and capacity to actualize the educational program as described; and
- the educational program is flexible enough to be adjusted once students are enrolled and their performance levels and learning needs assessed.

The basic components of a well-articulated educational program include:

- the grades the school will serve, the number of students anticipated in each grade, class size, what grades (and size) the school will start with, the school’s growth plan, the rationale for the growth plan, when the school will reach full enrollment, and the maximum number of students at full capacity;
- a proposed school calendar for the school’s first year of operation, total number of instructional hours and days, the length of the school day, a proposed weekly school schedule for students and teachers, including the minutes/hours per week the school will devote to core subjects in each grade, with *core subjects* explicitly defined;
- a description of the curriculum, including how the curriculum was identified or is being developed; course and sequence by subject for each grade level and subject; course outcomes; and clear alignment with Colorado State Standards and any other performance standards self-selected for the proposed school;
- a clear description of and rationale for specialized programs or school foci (such as career preparation, technology, performing arts, etc.), including anticipated student outcomes from such programs or foci;
- clearly stated promotion and graduation requirements;
- a *complete* professional development plan and schedule, specifying training that will occur prior to the opening of the proposed school and the amount, type and frequency of ongoing staff development and staff planning time that will be built into the school year;

- a structured plan for serving students who enter the school at different performance levels and/or have varying learning needs. This plan should identify and define the different types of students the school expects to serve and state specific instructional strategies and approaches to be used, for example, with students who need remediation as contrasted to students who are gifted, talented, or accelerated learners. General statements such, “The school will use differentiated instruction” are insufficient because they do not indicate what type of differentiation will occur, when, or why. *Note:* the application should also speak directly to how the school will attract instructional personnel capable of actualizing this plan; and
- a detailed description of additional programs, activities, or supports that the school will provide to students before- and after-school, in the evening, on Saturday, during the summer, or at other times. The application should identify these programs, activities, and supports by type (e.g., tutorial, remediation, enrichment, extracurricular). In addition, the application should state how each will connect to or support the basic education program; how such programs will be funded, staffed, managed and coordinated; and any requirements or triggers for student participation in these programs.

In addition, an educational program description should clearly describe the following three features.

*A Strong, Intentional **School Culture** and Supportive Climate*

A thorough application will describe how the school will develop and sustain a strong, distinctive culture that supports and promotes student learning, alleviates negative behavior, and permeates the educational program. By way of example, the application might describe (in no more than 2 pages) “*A Day in the Life of a Student.*” This kind of illustration will enable application reviewers to visualize the school’s culture and climate as part of a normal school day.

*A Viable Plan for Serving **At-Risk Populations***

“At-Risk” students may be defined in terms of truant behavior, pregnancy, substance abuse, frequent suspensions, withdrawals and/or transfers. Other descriptors may include low-income, minority, traditionally underserved, and special-needs students (including students with IEPs and English Language Learners). In most cases, “At-Risk” students are low-performing or are simply not engaged in school.

The application should explain the school’s specific plans to meet the educational and related needs of high-needs students, including:

- how the design team defines “at-risk” (if different from a local school district’s or CSI’s definition);
- what “at-risk” behavior and/or experiences the school will address;
- how the school will identify at-risk students; and
- how the school will address those students’ needs.

A strong application should detail:

- approaches to targeting at-risk students;
- clear and sound research-based instructional strategies geared specifically to these students;
- plans for recruiting experienced and qualified staff (for example, faculty trained in ESL instruction);
- specific professional development and staff training that will be provided to all faculty to prepare them for serving at-risk students;
- special programs and supports for these students, including extra- and co-curricular activities; and
- a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches, curricula, programs, and activities specifically designed for at-risk students.

A *Solid* Accountability and Assessment Plan

School applications should contain a sound and relatively thorough, albeit preliminary, Accountability and Assessment Plan that will guide the school to achieving successful student performance outcomes.

A solid Accountability and Assessment Plan delineates how the school, the board, and the authorizing district (or CSI, if it is the authorizer), will assess the quality of a school. The Plan should include multiple indicators that will track and demonstrate the progress of individual students and the school as a whole.

Assessment plans should include formative and summative assessments. *Formative evaluations* measure student performance for the purpose of determining students' learning needs and to inform instructional strategies. In other words, they are used to determine what students still need to learn. Unit pre-tests are examples of formative evaluations. *Summative evaluations* measure student performance for the purpose of evaluating the status and/or growth of student learning. In other words, they are used to determine how much students have learned. Standardized assessments required to determine whether schools are achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets under No Child Left Behind are typically used as summative evaluations. A school-developed year-end exam or performance-based assessment can also be a summative evaluation.

Unique assessments such as portfolios, presentations or performances – or any type of school-developed assessment -- can be an important feature of a school's assessment plan. However, for the results of such assessments to carry weight for external accountability purposes, you must demonstrate the *validity* and *reliability* of the assessments. See the guidance on “***Developing Sound Performance Goals and Measures***” for an explanation of how to develop validity and reliability in school-developed assessments.

A strong Accountability and Assessment Plan should state:

- what assessment data the school will collect, including assessments designed to measure the progress of English Language Learners, Special Education, Gifted/Talented and other students with special needs;
- when the school will collect such data;
- how and when the school will collect, analyze, and report results;

- the roles and responsibilities of the school leadership and teachers in the assessment plan;
- how the school will use data to drive and improve instruction; and
- how, when and who will implement any corrective action plans and curricular adjustments based on data.

In addition to assessing student performance, a solid Accountability and Assessment Plan should state goals and include the capacity to track data for indicators such as attendance, retention and mobility, graduation and on-track-to-matriculation rates, as well as fiscal management and other compliance-related requirements.

Strong **Organizational Leadership, Structure, and Capacity**

The application should clearly and transparently present the overall organizational structure of the proposed school, including lines of authority. The application should contain a clear and complete organizational chart that displays the Governing Board (generally at the top), the school leader (Principal or CEO), supervisory instructional or operational staff reporting directly to the school leader, and staff (or types of staff) reporting to supervisory personnel. The organizational chart may include as many staff positions as deemed necessary. The chart must be clear, sensible, and transparent, and indicate all inter- and intra-organizational connections and lines of authority. In addition, the organizational chart should be accompanied by narrative describing lines of authority, reporting protocol, and specific roles and responsibilities.

The application should also describe the individuals charged with implementing the school after the school is approved and leading the school once it has opened. Ideally, the school development team, the initial board and school leadership will consist of a diverse set of individuals who are truly supportive of and deeply committed to advancing the mission of the proposed school, and have the skill sets to create and operate a successful institution *built to last*. Resumes and brief bios should be presented for board members, the school leader, and other high-level administrative and management staff. The application should also include complete and accurate descriptions of the capacity and performance of any proposed education service providers with management responsibilities.

A Clear Rationale for **Selecting an Education Services Provider**

If an applicant is proposing to contract with an educational service provider (ESP), the application should clearly explain why the ESP was chosen, what services the ESP will provide, how the governing board will oversee and evaluate the ESP's performance, and how the ESP will be compensated. The application should describe due diligence and "comparison shopping" conducted in selecting the ESP. Boilerplate, unsupported statements to the effect that the ESP was the best candidate possible do not allow for effective evaluation of a school application and proposed contractual relationship with an ESP.

Defined **Governing Board Roles & Responsibilities**

The roles and responsibilities of the governing body must be expressed in precise language that communicates the board's role in ensuring accountability and defines how the board will exercise its fiduciary responsibility. The application should include:

- thoughtfully completed board questionnaires for each prospective member of the board (Note: This is not a requirement, but is strongly urged.);
- a clear statement of the responsibilities of each board officer position and of any identified committees;
- a concise summary of qualifications sought for additional board members and a description of how new board members will be elected or selected; and
- a board development plan, including board training, transitioning from an initial founding board to a permanent board, and plans for developing a board diverse in knowledge, skill sets, professional expertise, and racial or ethnic background (to the extent appropriate for the targeted school community).

The application should describe the means by which the governing board will be accountable to the District, parents, students, staff, and other school stakeholders. Organizational By-Laws should be the catalyst for developing Board policies and procedures (for attachment in draft form to the application); The By-Laws and the application (and eventually a fully developed Board manual) should explicitly state the governing body's regular meeting schedule, the board's explicit powers and duties (as distinguished from the powers and duties of school leadership), the responsibilities of committees, the process for board growth and expansion, and board terms and succession plans. Issues such as compliance with the Open Meetings Act, identifying and avoiding conflict of interest, instances where directors may not be fully covered by liability insurance, etc. should also be expressly stated in the application and committed to formal policy.

Explicit **Staff Qualifications and a Viable Recruitment Plan**

CLCS Qualifier: Strong applications present a well-qualified school leader capable of making appropriate faculty and staff hiring decisions. However, no matter whether the school leader is identified or not, a design team must develop and present a well-defined faculty and staff recruitment strategy, including job descriptions and qualifications sought for each position described in the application and contained in the budget, along with a hiring timetable.

A statement of qualifications specifies the professional and personal experience, background, skills and knowledge, educational levels, and certification/credentials that are sought for each faculty and staff position. Such qualifications should mirror or be the basis for **job descriptions** and subsequent position postings. All position descriptions should include criteria that meet applicable state and federal requirements for credentialing and "highly qualified" status under NCLB.

A sound **recruitment strategy** articulates how, where and when a school will attract and hire well-qualified faculty staff, and include a timetable for completion of all hiring. (This timetable should feed into the school's pre-opening professional development plan and schedule.) A recruiting plan should include marketing and proactive recruiting strategies, including plans for advertising or posting positions. The plan should also explain how

partnerships and networking will be used to attract job candidates; and should spell out the hiring/selection process for all staff. A strong application will err on the side of detail in laying out selection and hiring procedures.

□ *A Sound Financial Plan*

The financial plan for the school should quantify every single component of the school application. In other words, each section of the narrative application should be aligned with budgets and financial projections. To ensure this, applicants should cross-check the application narrative against financial projections.

Five Year Budget

The financial plan should be presented in a 5-year budget and supported by narrative assumptions. Annual budgets must balance (or break even) in each of the five years; and an applicant should show over a three-to-five year (charter) term growth in positive fund balance. The financial plan must contain statutorily required reserves and should contain additional reserves for contingencies and emergencies.

Tips on preparing financial projections follow.

Budget Assumptions (revenues and expenses)

A complete annual or five-year budget should reflect every source of revenue and potential cost described in the narrative of the application. **Revenues** are based on district per-pupil allocations, state, federal and any *committed* grant funds. **Expenses** include every staff position, every core educational strategy and program, all after-school and ancillary programs and activities -- especially any that are key to achieving academic goals -- and contingencies, including unplanned facilities costs. Expenses should not be low-balled but should be realistic.

Grants (fundraising goals)

An applicant can augment *entitlement* revenues by **fundraising** through grants and other contributions. However, an application should never exaggerate fundraising plans or list fundraising *hopes* as *commitments*. Any and all amounts attributed to fundraising should be supported by clear evidence that the funds are committed. Fundraising items and amounts for which commitments have not been made at the time of application submission will be acceptable only if the applicant has demonstrated previous fundraising success.

An application should articulate a comprehensive fundraising strategy, especially where programs and strategies geared to serving high-needs students warrant extra costs. A comprehensive fundraising strategy should describe:

- **who** is responsible for fundraising/grant-writing;
- **what** activities, programs, and costs will be supported or subsidized by non-entitlement funds;
- **how much** the school expects to raise for each of the above-identified costs;
- **how** the school will raise non-entitlement funds, including **whom** the school will apply to for such funds;
- **when** the school would expect to receive the funds; and

- **triggers** for revising planned expenditures if fundraising targets or deadlines are not achieved.

Start-up (from approval to school opening)

The Start-up budget quantifies expenditures during the time between approval and school opening. The budget should be consistent with the start-up plan articulated in the application and yet cannot reflect a deficit or cash-flow shortage. If the start-up timeline indicates an implementation step to be taken -- for example, a hiring or procurement -- six months before the school will open, this projected cost cannot be “loaded” into the budget for the first fiscal year of operations. Determining funds that can or will flow to the school prior to the fiscal year in which the school will open is one of the most important aspects of school start-up planning.

Cash Flow (monthly depiction)

A Cash Flow budget provides monthly bottom-line projections for early operations and is a critical financial planning and financial management tool. The purpose of a Cash Flow budget is to ensure that applicants understand the timing of revenues inflow and do not plan to spend funds that are not available at any given point in time. In preparing a cash flow budget, determining the timing of disbursements, and thus making conscious decisions about allocating planned costs over the course of a fiscal year., are critical planning considerations. First-year cash-flow projections must tie to summary first-year financial projections. If an applicant cannot accommodate all planned costs described (for Year 1 of operations), the application narrative must accordingly be revised.

Preparing Budget Documents: The person designated to work on the budget during the application development stage should understand Generally Accepted Accounting Principles, have some knowledge about school financing (specifically about recurring and predictable, and non-recurring and non-predictable costs), and be directly involved in developing the entire school application. Budgeting and financial planning should not take place in isolation from the school planning process. If they do, some critical aspect of the school plan will not be appropriately quantified, which will call into question both the thoroughness of the applicant’s planning and ability to execute the school plan.

A Sound Facilities Plan or Strategy

A strong application contains a well-conceived plan for identifying, obtaining, readying, and, if necessary, financing a facility for the proposed school. Facilities may or may not be available through an authorizing school district.

A facility description should include:

- the facility’s address and proximity to the geographical areas the school is targeting;
- the layout, including square footage, the number and size of classrooms, common areas, recreational space, restrooms, any community facilities, and any other facilities;
- a school-specific space usage plan;
- evidence that the proposed facility can be secured (i.e., letter of intent, memorandum of understanding and/or contract);
- a description of the potential renovation needs to make the facility ready for school operations and ensure compliance with applicable building and/or occupancy codes;

- a project timeline and person(s) responsible for overseeing the renovations;
- a budget (or a Sources and Uses form) with estimated cost of renovations and an indication of specific revenues and other financing to pay for improvements;
- an explanation of whether the facility can accommodate the proposed school through full growth, and if not, plans for acquiring additional space and/or facilities; and
- a back-up facilities plan for opening the school in the event the desired or secured facility is not ready for occupancy **by the school's opening date.**