



Tennessee Department of Education

Pre-Opening Year Support

Authorizer Toolkit | August 2026



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Pre-Opening Year Support

Approval of a charter application marks a milestone for both the founding team and the authorizer, but it is just the beginning of the work that both will do to get ready for the school to serve students. The months between approval of a charter school and the first day of school, the pre-opening year, are among the most critical in the charter lifecycle. This is when the founding team's plans, capacities, and vision come to life. For authorizers, it is a period of active partnership, verification, and support to ensure that every school is fully prepared to serve students safely and successfully from day one. When done well, this stage sets the tone for years of effective support and oversight.

Getting off to a good start means two things:

1. **Ensuring readiness:** a school has met all operational, legal, and educational requirements to open
2. **Building relationships:** the authorizer and school have established trust, clarity, and a shared commitment to students

This process is designed to ensure that the school can provide a quality education that aligns with its mission and meets all legal obligations. It is also the bridge between the application phase (where plans are proposed) and ongoing oversight (where performance is evaluated). For authorizers in Tennessee, this phase is also where internal systems such as finance, human resources, special education, operations, and accountability must work in concert to ensure the new school is supported and compliant.

Ensuring Readiness

Establishing a comprehensive pre-opening process will help schools stay on track to open on time. Authorizers should develop a process that is organized and action-oriented so that charter school leaders efficiently meet key requirements. Providing training on the process as well as scheduling monthly check-ins can help streamline the process. A high-quality pre-opening process is rooted in transparency and evidence to ensure that every charter school is not only ready to open, but ready to thrive.

The following are the components of the pre-opening year process, which align with the [Charter School Operator Toolkit](#). The National Association for Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has

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two resources that may be beneficial to review: [Ready to Open Guide](#) and [Ready to Open Checklist Template](#). The [Tennessee Charter School Pre-Opening Checklist](#) can be customized to fit the needs of the authorizer.

- **Governance and Leadership:** Strong governance provides the foundation for accountability and mission fidelity. Trained, independent boards ensure legal compliance and sound oversight from the start.
- **Finance and Resource Management:** Financial readiness ensures the school can meet payroll, operate effectively, and sustain its programs without disruption.
- **Facilities and Operations:** Safe, compliant facilities protect student and staff welfare and uphold public confidence.
- **Staffing and Human Resources (HR):** Qualified, prepared staff are essential for student learning and operational stability on day one.
- **Academic Readiness:** Academic readiness ensures students receive instruction aligned to state standards and the school's mission from the first day.
- **Student Support Services:** Ensuring equitable access and support services demonstrates the school's readiness to serve all students.
- **Family and Community Engagement:** Early communication and visibility build trust and help families prepare for enrollment and participation.

Practice Spotlight:

One Tennessee authorizer holds joint planning sessions with new school leaders to co-create a communication protocol for the year. This includes setting expectations for response times, documentation, and meeting frequency—preventing miscommunications and modeling the mutual respect essential to a strong relationship.

Building Relationships

The pre-opening year is when the authorizer–school relationship truly begins. Both parties share the same goal: a successful school launch that meets students’ needs and community aspirations. Early and consistent communication helps establish mutual trust and a culture of transparency.

Authorizer practices that foster positive relationships include:

- Start early and stay present.
- Ensure continuity.
- Be transparent about expectations.
- Balance accountability with support.
- Respect autonomy as appropriate.

Many challenges that new charter schools face stem from confusion or misunderstanding of how they fit into the existing systems of the local education agency (LEA). Coordinating with new schools early and often can help minimize issues. As discussed in earlier sections of the toolkit, the role of the district charter authorizing office is to provide information and support to new schools and building a relationship in that pre-opening year is paramount.

Practice Spotlight:

One Tennessee authorizer invites new charter leaders to observe principal meetings and participate in district training relevant to their LEA functions, such as data reporting and special education compliance. These shared spaces build familiarity, demystify LEA systems, and reinforce that everyone is working toward the same goal of serving students well.

If a School Isn’t Ready

Sometimes, despite best efforts, a school does not meet critical readiness benchmarks such as securing a facility, achieving viable enrollment, or resolving governance issues. In those cases, authorizers must act in the best interest of students, even if it means delaying or denying opening. Embedding language in the charter agreement that makes a school’s opening conditional upon meeting ready to open criteria clarifies expectations for both the school and the authorizer and provides legal grounding to delay opening, if necessary.

How to Identify a Struggling School in the Pre-Opening Year

- Noncompliance with pre-opening plans/timelines
- Inability to secure a facility within 60 days prior to opening ([T.C.A. § 49-13-136\(f\)](#))
- Enrollment numbers are insufficient to sustain the program
- Noncompliance with applicable state laws and regulations to ensure effective management of school operations
- Inability to recruit and hire the necessary leadership and instructional staff
- Unable to produce a viable operating budget for the upcoming school year

Having a plan in place to track the process of the pre-opening year progress will help authorizers and charter operators be aware of any issues that might prevent the charter school from opening on time.

Decision to Delay Opening

In the event that the charter school is not ready to open, the authorizer should notify the department using the [Charter School Document Upload Form](#) that the school has decided to delay opening.

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Appendix:

Tennessee Charter School Pre-Opening Checklist

Tennessee Charter School Pre-Opening Checklist			
Governance & Leadership	Schools should demonstrate the following: • A functioning governing board with regular meetings • Adopted board policies • Completed board training • Approval of any necessary waivers • Enrollment processes that meet state requirements • An established calendar that meets state requirements • A school improvement plan for federal funding compliance	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Review of board minutes, bylaws, training certificates, conflict-of-interest statements • Observation of board meetings periodically • Maintenance of documentation of waivers approved through the application process or submitted requests • Review of student enrollment form, processes for collecting the required records, and lottery procedures • Review of school calendar • Review of submitted school improvement plan	Status Updates
Finance & Resource Management	Schools should demonstrate the following:	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Review of budget	

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	• An approved budget that follows the Tennessee Standardized System of Accounting and Reporting • Established bank accounts and insurance • Processes for procurement and purchasing • Enrollment numbers sufficient to sustain operations • Assignment of user roles in ePlan ▪ Establishment of a Supplier ID in Edison, the state's financial management system • Establishment of a payroll system • Securing of an independent certified accountant for auditing and lottery processes	• Review of financial statements • Review of procurement and purchasing processes • Review of enrollment projections and on-going updates of enrollment numbers • Provision of training on set up and use of ePlan and submission of contact information for the finance and grant management lead • Provision of training on Edison and the submission process • Review of payroll contract and/or submission of payroll contact • Review of independent accounting contract	
Facilities & Operations	Schools should demonstrate the following: • A secured facility • Certificate of occupancy ▪ School safety and emergency operations plans • Accessibility compliance	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Site visits • Review of final lease or purchase agreement and documentation for occupancy	

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	• Required signage and notices • Availability of health services • Transportation plans • Food service processes • Custodial service setup • A functioning student information system (SIS) and the processes to verify data • A class schedule that provides a minimum of 6.5 hours of instructional time daily • A student/family handbook which includes the required notices and information	• Review of safety and emergency plans • Review of documentation of relationship with a registered nurse and/or physician • Review of contract for transportation and submission of school contact information • Review of contact with custodial vendor • Provision of training on the SIS and submission of name and contact information of SIS manager • Review of class schedule • Review of student/family handbook	
Staffing & Human Resources	Schools should demonstrate the following: • Hiring of key leadership positions • Hiring of appropriate number of teachers • Completion of background checks • Verification of licensure	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Submission of name and contact information for leadership positions • Review teacher positions projected and on-going updates on positions	

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	• Completion of in-service and state mandated training • Availability of employee benefits. Including retirement • Determination of a teacher evaluation model • Setup of teachers in TNCompass and a plan for teacher observations • An employee handbook • Establishment of a system for maintaining employee information	• Submission of in-service and state mandated training dates (can be included in the school calendar submission) • Submission of required paperwork for benefits and name of the person responsible for Tennessee Consolidated Retirement System (TCRS) reporting • Submission of teacher evaluation model and plan for observations • Provision of training on TNCompass and how to request access • Review employee handbook • Review of the HR information system	
Academic Readiness	Schools should demonstrate the following: • Curriculum decisions aligned to state standards • A promotion and retention policy • A uniform grading system for grades 9-12	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Review of policies and procurement documents • Interviews with leadership • Review of FLSP	

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	• Procurement of curriculum and instructional materials • Implementation of Foundational Literacy Skills Plan (FLSP) for grades K-3 • TCAP schedule and training plan • Documentation of request for student records and a secure space for storage	• Review of school calendar and/or the provision of training on TCAP • Site visit to review record requests and storage space	
Student Support Services	Schools should demonstrate the following: • Procedures to identify, locate, and evaluate all children ages 3-21 who are suspected to have a disability (i.e., Child Find) • A home language survey for the identification and assessment of English proficiency • Universal screening decisions • Processes for administration of ELPA21 • Documentation for the provision of services required by student Individual Education Programs	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Review of student/family handbook • Review of website • Contract for school psychology services • Enrollment procedures and documents • Interviews with leadership • Review staffing information • Review class schedules for inclusion of time for intervention and support services • Review contracts for the provision of speech/language and related	

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	(IEPs), Individual Learning Plans (ILPs and ILP-Ds) and 504 Plans • Plan for implementation of RTI² • Access to appropriate state systems • Systems to identify students experiencing homelessness and refer students for migratory program eligibility	services (e.g., occupational therapy, physical therapy, etc.) ▪ Provision of access to state systems such as SSO, TN Pulse, ELPA 21, etc.	
Family & Community Engagement	Schools should demonstrate the following: • communication plans • family engagement events • community partnerships	The authorizer may verify by the following: • Review of student/parent handbook • Interviews with leadership • Review of communication samples • Review of school calendar	