



A CHECKLIST FOR DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL TENNESSEE CHARTER SCHOOL

This guide is based on—and adapted to Tennessee with permission—a similar guide developed by the [Delaware Charter Schools Network](#).

A charter school application that merits a recommendation for approval should present a clear, realistic picture of how the school expects to operate; be detailed in how this school will raise student achievement; and inspire confidence in the applicant's capacity to successfully implement the proposed academic and operational plans. In addition to meeting the criteria that are specific to that section, each part of the proposal should align with the overall mission, budget, and goals of the application.

Recommendations for approval or denial will be based on the written application (narrative and attachments), independent due diligence, and, if offered by the authorizer, applicant interviews.

Successfully launching a school (chartered or not) requires significant effort, and a founding leadership team capable of developing and executing a sound academic and business operation. Most current operators will report that the time from conception to submission of an application that was approved was at least two years.

The charter school application is an opportunity to demonstrate to the authorizer your capacity to design and implement an academic program, operate a business, and be a good steward of public trust and funds, in order to prepare students for successful post-secondary education, work and citizenship.

This checklist offers interested individuals practical measures of progress toward successfully designing and operating a public charter school in Tennessee. In addition, the Starting a Tennessee Charter School flowchart illustrates the application process from conception to approval.

Additional resources are available on the department's [charter schools webpage](#), including the [application materials](#), answers to [frequently asked questions](#), and Additional Resources links.

STAGE 1: EXPLORATION

Establishing a Resourceful and Dedicated Founding Team

The founding team consists of multiple parents, community members, educators, business persons, or other stakeholders who are well-situated to successfully start a high-quality charter school.

- The founding team has a genuine personal interest or concern for the student population to be served. This motivation can be clearly articulated by all members of the founding team. The founding team is not driven to create a charter school by personal financial, political, or other counterproductive motivations.
- The founding team consists of self-driven people who have the motivation, time, and other resources necessary to undertake the challenging task of starting a charter school.
- The founding team places integrity and ethical practices at the forefront in all decision-making processes.
- The founding team has designated an individual or a small leadership team to provide collaborative leadership, including delegating responsibilities to other members of the founding team, keeping other members of the team on task, and seeing the application/startup process through from start to finish.
- The founding team demonstrates a willingness to consider and implement outside feedback and recommendations.
- The founding team consists of at least three individuals who have diverse skill sets (e.g. education, business, legal, fundraising, etc.).
- The founding team recognizes areas of weakness and need in its composition (e.g. absence of a business perspective, legal perspective, etc.) and actively solicits support from outside individuals/organizations in these areas.
- The members of the founding team are committed to working together collaboratively. Processes are in place to hear all opinions, to respect dissenting opinions, and to move forward with effective decision-making, e.g. through a code of conduct, decision-making process, etc.

Researching Charter Schools and Best Practices

The charter school founding team demonstrates a commitment to understanding charter schools and pursuing best educational practices.

- Multiple members of the founding team have attended at least two charter school conferences or workshops prior to submitting the charter application.
- The founding team works actively with a charter school support organization during the application and startup process.
- All members of the founding team have received training in accountability and assessment planning.
- All members of the founding board of directors have received governance training as a whole.

- The founding team is committed to understanding and implementing research-based best practices.
- Members of the founding team have visited and informally evaluated at least three successful charter schools.
- The founding team demonstrates a strong commitment to ongoing professional development for the board of directors, school administration, and faculty. This commitment will be reflected in the school's application and allocation of financial resources.

Understanding the State Law and Application

The founding team establishes a clear understanding of the law that governs charter schools and the required application process.

- Members of the founding team have read the Tennessee charter school law.
- Members of the founding team have read and understand the following: several strong sample applications from other schools; the current application and budget forms and scoring rubric for Tennessee charter schools.
- Members of the founding team have identified a portal for centralization of information about the application and school development process that is accessible to all founding team members.

Developing a Vision for the School

The charter school founding team demonstrates a commitment to fulfilling the impetus for the charter school movement by creating a public education option in Tennessee.

- The founding team researches all available charter school options in Tennessee, other unique models within Tennessee public school districts, and other unique models nationwide, prior to establishing the school vision.
- The founding team follows a process of establishing a vision for the school that encompasses the legal expectations of charter schools and the accountability expectations for all Tennessee schools.
- The founding team clearly articulates its vision in writing.

Beginning Community Outreach

The founding team actively focuses its development efforts on effective outreach practices.

- The founding team has adequately researched the community in which the charter school will exist and interviewed a variety of community members to verify that there is a need and desire for the charter school in the community.
- The founding team has adequately researched the student population to be served to understand its educational needs.
- The founding team actively networks with community leaders, local legislators, and other key figures in the community in order to understand the community and to garner support for the charter school.

- The founding team recruits additional founding team and prospective board members in order to broaden the pool of expertise and the skill-base of those working to start the school.

Recruiting a Potential School Leader

The charter school founding team recognizes that engaging the advice and commitment of a school leader early in the development process will enhance viability of the project.

- Members of the founding team attend at least one seminar or workshop, or access professional support, on recruiting charter school leaders.
- The founding team articulates, in writing, the qualities that will be essential in a school leader as related to the vision of the school and the daily operations of the school.
- The founding team assigns one individual to lead the school leader recruitment process.

STAGE 2: SCHOOL QUALITIES IDENTIFIED

Establishing a Relationship with the Authorizer

The charter school founding team understands the authorizer/school relationship.

- The founding team recognizes that a good relationship with potential authorizers is critical to the founding, start-up, and operational stages of the charter school and commits to creating a positive environment for success.
- The founding team identifies its choice of authorizer and approaches the appropriate personnel regarding the development of the school.
- The founding team designates several representatives to serve as the primary contacts with the authorizer. These representatives will provide personal contact information to the authorizer, commit to regular communication regarding the school's development to the authorizer, and serve on the school's founding board.

Developing a Mission and Goals for the School

The charter school founding team places high value on the development of mission and goals for the school that focus on student achievement and outcomes.

- The founding team understands that the mission and goals will drive the success of the school. Charter schools with clearly articulated missions and goals have a greater likelihood of success, both academically and in their ability to attract students.
- The founding team communicates with local educators and the TDOE regarding specific expectations that may be required of school goals.
- The founding team reviews the mission and goals of highly successful charter schools nation-wide.
- The founding team reaches out to other educational, non-profit, and business communities for an external scan of the school's mission and goals.

Identifying Formal Structure

The charter school founding team recognizes that the process of application will call for a more formal organizational structure.

- The founding team outlines the roles of founding board members.
- The founding team identifies potential members of the school's founding board and, through a process accepted by the team as a whole, appoints its founding board.
- The founding board accepts legal responsibility for the school's development and authorization.

Recognizing Strengths and Weaknesses of the Founding Team

The charter school founding team understands that developing and writing a successful application is a group process requiring expertise in a number of areas.

- The founding team establishes a relationship with at least two recently approved charter schools to gain further understanding of the school development and application writing process.
- The founding team identifies the required skill sets that will be essential in developing and writing the charter school application.
- The founding team identifies team weaknesses and develops planning to address those weaknesses, either through reaching out to potential supporters willing to provide services pro bono or to fee-for-service organizations with expertise in charter school application development and writing.
- The founding team defines all necessary services it may need to purchase in the process of the charter school application development, and develops a clear plan of team support or fundraising to help offset the application development costs.

Commitment to Accountability

The founding team demonstrates a commitment to accountability and this commitment is reflected in the school's development process, application, and goals upon opening.

- The founding team has successfully participated in an external application review process prior to the submission of the charter application to the chartering authority.
- The founding team commits to participating in a comprehensive self- study and external site visit review within the first three years of the school's existence.
- The founding team is committed to having the school's academic, operational and financial performance measured by a framework created by the school or in collaboration with the authorizer. This commitment will be communicated both in the charter application and during the transition from a founding team to a board-governed, administrator-run school.
- The founding team is committed to creating a permanent institution that sustains the integrity of the founders' vision through written documentation and ongoing review of core values, ongoing documentation of board decisions, processes for transfer of leadership (both on the board and in administration), and effective policy making at the board level.

STAGE 3: SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

Addressing Technical Aspects of School Development

The charter school founding team begins crafting specific educational and organization components of the school.

- The founding team has a full understanding of the application expectations and divides the responsibilities for application response among its members.
- The founding team members are fully engaged professionally, or personally, in the specific area of the application for which they have accepted responsibility, and actively seek support in developing that knowledge base as it applies to charter schools.
- The founding team establishes collective knowledge and on a regular basis shares its findings with the founding board.
- The founding team develops a business plan for the school that serves as the foundation for the school's non-educational programming.

Identifying Demand and Impact

The charter school founding team recognizes the essential information that will be derived from a study of demand for the school model and the impact its creation may have on other public schools as well as the new school's enrollment projections.

- The founding team undertakes a formal study of demand to determine the likelihood of achieving full capacity. The study will demonstrate support of both parents and community leaders for the proposed charter school.
- The founding team researches current public schools in the area. This research should reflect the ability of the proposed charter school to establish and maintain its student capacity as identified in the application.

Engaging Community Collaboration

The charter school founding team recognizes close collaboration with organizations in the community will lead to greater success in recruiting and retaining students and establishing a place in the community.

- The founding team understands cultural competency and has participated in at least one workshop or seminar on the subject.
- The founding team embraces diversity and demonstrates such with its own diversity and with clearly articulated relationships with community organizations.
- The founding team actively researches community organizations and reaches out to those organizations that may complement the charter school's model.

STAGE 4: WRITING THE APPLICATION

The Writing Process

The charter school founding team understands that research and development of the application must transfer into formal responses to the specific questions outlined in the authorizer's application.

- The founding team recognizes the deadlines set forth in the application and appoints a lead writer who will be responsible for coordinating all other writers, the final editing of the application, and the delivery of the application to the authorizer in a timely fashion.
- The founding team researches past applications and collaborates with current charter schools to identify resources for use in writing the application.
- The founding team establishes a formal process for approval of prepared responses to the application.
- The founding team respects the application instructions of the authorizer and recognizes the expectations of authorizer by answering all questions posed and providing an application that is complete and error free.

Ownership of the Application

The charter school founding board takes formal ownership of the written application upon completion.

- The founding board carefully reviews the application prior to printing to ensure accuracy.
- The founding board is responsible for all information provided in the application and will be held to the information in the public review process.
- The founding board signs all necessary paperwork finalizing the submission.

STAGE 5: APPLICATION REVIEW

Preparing for Formal Application Review

The charter school founding board recognizes that the final stage of the application process requires preparation and training for effective response to the authorizer.

- The entire founding board commits to attend all meetings regarding the charter school application set by the authorizer.
- The founding board participates in a mock panel review of the school's application to prepare for the actual authorizer interview process.
- The founding board maintains regular and consistent communication with the proposed authorizer and responds promptly to any questions or concerns posed.