



## Charter School Pre-Opening Protocol

### Overview

The Tennessee Public Charter School Commission ("Commission") holds all charter schools under its authorization accountable for providing students with a high-quality, public education. As a trusted partner, the Commission provides access and support to excellent charter schools through rigorous oversight, transparency, and accountability.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the Commission outlines a pre-opening process under Commission Policy 3.100 – Charter Agreements (aligned to the Commission Policy 3.000 – Core Authorizing Principles) to ensure all schools are compliant and ready to open their doors to serve students.<sup>2</sup>

For all schools opening under the Commission, the Commission has a robust and detailed pre-opening process that spans the eight months before a new school's opening under the Commission's authorization. This pre-opening process begins in November and concludes in July. The Commission works to streamline the pre-opening process, making it organized and actionable and minimizing administrative burden. The Commission has also created a series of monthly best practice trainings aligned to the pre-opening checklist for schools and operators.

### Pre-Opening Requirements

Pre-opening requirements are a set of actions that a school must complete before opening its doors and welcoming students. Schools must demonstrate that they have met all requirements within the outlined "Ready to Open" criteria and are ready to begin instruction. Pre-opening requirements also include documentation of completion of items including, but not limited to, enrollment, data management, staff hiring and licensure, grants, funding, policies, and physical facilities. The Commission provides a detailed list of all pre-opening items within the pre-opening checklist, which is an exhibit to the charter agreement.

### Updating Start-Up Plans

Following authorization by the Commission, schools are expected to submit an updated plan and timeline for key "Ready to Open" pre-opening items (facilities, financing, community engagement, etc.). Considering the amount of time and work between when the initial application was submitted and the Commission's decision on the appeal, updates are necessary,

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<sup>1</sup> TPCSC Mission Statement [1.000 – Tennessee Public Charter School Mission Statement](#)

<sup>2</sup> All [Commission rules and policies](#) may be found on the [Commission's website](#).

and the pre-opening process and submissions will be built upon these updated plans. The Commission will meet with schools to review the pre-opening process in November, and schools will submit updated plans by the December meeting. Start-up plans shall be updated to align with current progress and revised timelines, as compared to the approved charter application.

Note: the basis of the start-up plan, facilities, staffing, enrollment, etc. shall be based on what was approved within the charter application and the charter agreement. Commission staff will review any modifications to these plans to determine if they require a material modification to the charter agreement. These changes include but are not limited to the location of the facility, projected enrollment, and projected grades served in Year 1.

### **Pre-Opening Checklist**

The pre-opening checklist is broken into three sections:

1. **Ready to Open Criteria:** The “Ready to Open” criteria outline foundational items necessary for a school to be ready to open and specifically cover enrollment, facilities, staffing, and the financial plan. These deliverables generally align with the material terms stated in the charter application, and the operator should aim to complete all items in accordance with the timelines specified within the criteria. If a school does not meet the dates listed within the timeline, it does not necessarily mean a delay is required; however, schools should strongly consider exercising their right to delay if they are not meeting the outlined dates or are not on track to meet them within the general timeframe.
2. **Required Compliance Items:** The second part of the checklist is primarily compliance-based with applicable laws and regulations to ensure effective management of school operations.
3. **Facility Walkthrough and Preview of Reporting Calendar:** Finally, there are checklists for the school facility walkthrough that will be conducted in July as well as a preview of upcoming reporting calendar deliverables. The reporting calendar is a document that outlines regular submissions that are required by schools on an ongoing basis. Schools will have other tasks to complete outside of this checklist, such as those specific to individual grant applications.

It is the Commission’s obligation to determine if schools meet all necessary requirements for opening. Pursuant to Commission Policy 3.100, all requirements for pre-opening must be completed in accordance with the charter agreement. A school or operator’s failure to complete pre-opening items or effectively communicate regarding progress could result in a delay in opening. It is the school and/or operator’s responsibility to fulfill the requirements for pre-

opening. The Commission reserves the right to require the school delay its opening by one academic year should the school be materially off track for a successful opening.

### **Timeline and Completion of Pre-Opening Checklist**

A comprehensive pre-opening checklist is provided to each school and/or operator with a detailed list of pre-opening actions, documentation, and deadlines. This pre-opening checklist serves as a working document between the Commission and the school to track progress and ensure all items are accomplished. This checklist is sent to schools by November, prior to the first pre-opening meeting to allow time to review.

Schools will use this checklist to delegate tasks amongst their teams, track progress on pre-opening, and organize deadlines. This checklist is subject to change as regulations and policies may change.

Schools are expected to submit all requirements within the checklist through the designated online shared folder in a timely manner and effectively communicate any questions or delays. All deadlines are laid out within the checklist provided. The Commission will hold monthly check-in meetings with schools and operators to ensure all questions are answered and progress is going smoothly. In addition to these monthly check-ins, the Commission will hold monthly best practice meetings (additional detail below). In July, the Commission will conduct an in-person facility walkthrough and transition meeting at the school with the school team.

### **Preparing for the Pre-Opening Process**

- Identify a point of contact and pre-opening team: Communication between the Commission and operators during the pre-opening process is frequent and sometimes will fall outside of the formal check-ins and monthly meetings. Designating a pre-opening point of contact and providing a list of roles and responsibilities for the school's pre-opening team is important to ensure effective and efficient communication.
- Submit updated pre-opening plan/timeline: By December's pre-opening meeting, schools must provide the Commission with updates regarding facilities, financing, community engagement, etc. Schools should update the start-up plan included in the charter application for submission.
- Monthly Meetings: The Commission will schedule monthly meetings to review on progress and offer professional development on specific requirements and topics, particularly regarding any targeted areas of support for the operator. Individual check-ins will be thirty minutes in length and will be scheduled within the seven/eight-month timeline. Attendance at these meetings with the pre-opening point of contact and any applicable staff is critical, as it serves as an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the

pre-opening process and deliverables required by the school. The Commission also holds monthly best practice trainings with all pre-opening schools and/or operators. These are one hour in length and review crucial pre-opening items. These meetings are also an opportunity for operators to collaborate and share questions.

- **File Sharing and Documentation:** The Commission will set up a file sharing system through Microsoft Teams where all necessary pre-opening documentation will be uploaded. Documentation due dates and file naming conventions will be provided within the pre-opening checklist. It is the school's responsibility to ensure all documents are properly uploaded within the file sharing system.

### **Process of Internal Review of Submissions**

- Commission staff completes an internal review of submitted materials after each submission date.
- If immediate follow-up or action is needed, or if there are missing items, the school will receive an email outlining action steps.
- If no immediate action is needed, schools can expect a confirmation that materials have been received and are complete. Please note that as items are reviewed by individual Commission team members, schools and/or operators may receive additional communication regarding submissions and any changes that may need to be made.
- Commission staff will ask for updates regarding all "Ready to Open" items at each check-in. While there are specific timelines for items within the checklist, the Commission staff may ask for additional documentation or updates as operators work through these foundational items. It is the school's responsibility to respond to Commission staff's requests for this information.

### **Monthly Best-Practice Meetings**

- November: Pre-Opening Kickoff Meeting – Overview of Checklist and Submission of Updated Plan for Ready to Open Criteria\*
- December: Authorizing and Ongoing Monitoring, What to Expect and Review of Submitted Start-up Plan\*
- January: School Performance Framework and Accountability\*
- February: Enrollment and Data Management
- March: Grants and Funding
- April: Teacher Licensure, Staffing, and Special Populations\*



- May: Preparing for Policy Audit and Monitoring and Implementation of Special Populations
- June: Revisiting Data, Management, and the Student Information System ("SIS")
- July: Transition from Pre-Opening to Reporting Calendar and Facilities Walkthrough

\*Governing board members encouraged to attend these trainings.

*All meetings are held virtually via Microsoft Teams unless otherwise specified within the schedule.*