



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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Charter Application Review Process and Criteria for Review

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (Department) conducts a thorough review of charter applications, working within the timelines created by the statute and regulations.

Objective of Process

The objective of the charter application review process is to award charters to applicants who show the greatest probability of creating public schools of the highest quality. The Department conducts a process with multiple phases that includes participation by internal and external reviewers, as well as opportunities for public comment, and interviews with each founding group. The prospectuses and final applications are reviewed against extensive criteria which are outlined in 603 CMR 1.05 and established by the Department through the application.

Prospectus and Final Application Panel Review

In the current application process, every prospectus and final application was reviewed by an average of eight individuals. The Department utilizes multiple reviewers for prospectuses and final applications, including school leaders and teachers, education consultants, representatives from non-profits, higher education administrators, and members of the Department's staff. Teams of reviewers read the prospectuses and final charter applications thoroughly, with reference to the criteria in the charter application.

At the prospectus stage, Department staff incorporates the written review of the external reviewers into their discussion and evaluation of each prospectus. After reviewing the prospectuses, questions and concerns the review team raised are communicated in writing to all applicants and invitations are issued to those chosen to move into the final application stage.

At the final application stage, review panels discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the application and identify areas where clarification from the applicant is needed. This process helps to generate questions for the next step, an interview with each founding group.

Public Comment

In order to solicit comments on charter applications from the public during the current application cycle, the Department held five public hearings in November in areas where applicants propose to locate and requested written comments from the public, superintendents, and school committee members. All oral or written comments are reviewed and any substantial issues raised about a specific application are added to the list of questions for the applicant interview.

Interviews

The Department interviews all final applicant groups. Interviews last approximately two hours. The interviews allow applicants to respond to questions about weaknesses or issues of capacity identified in the review of their applications or to clarify aspects of their applications.

Interviewers note the degree to which the applicant group successfully addressed the identified weaknesses of its application and evaluate, in person, the capacity of the founding group.

Department staff presents all of the information to the Commissioner and, based upon the information presented, the Commissioner determines which recommendations, if any, to make for the February meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board).

Proven Provider Determination

When an applicant proposes a charter school in districts that have performed on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in the lowest 10 percent statewide for two consecutive previous years and where the 9 percent net school spending cap has been or is expected to be raised, the applicant must meet the definition of proven provider in 603 CMR 1.02 and meet the qualifications to achieve proven provider status as defined in 603 CMR 1.05(2). The Commissioner determines proven provider status at the conclusion of the prospectus review and prior to final application submission. During this application cycle, three proven providers were recognized by the Commissioner, including three national school support organizations. The groups identified by the Commissioner during this cycle are:

- Big Picture Learning, a national school support organization;
- Blueprint Network Schools, a national school support organization, in partnership with the Resiliency Foundation, a local non-profit organization; and
- Building Excellent Schools, a national school support organization.

The regulations, at 603 CMR 1.05(2), define the qualifications of a proven provider as follows:

The applicant must submit evidence satisfactory to the Commissioner to demonstrate a significant management or leadership role at a school or similar program that is an academic success, a viable organization, and relevant to the proposed charter.

- (a) The applicant shall submit a detailed description of role(s) and responsibilities at the successful school(s) or program(s).
- (b) The applicant shall submit data demonstrating success in student academic performance and evidence of academic program success, including but not limited to:
 - i. proficiency levels on the Massachusetts comprehensive assessment system or equivalent assessments for all students and for one or more targeted subgroups as defined in M.G.L. c.71, s.89(i)(3) which are similar to statewide averages in English language arts and Mathematics for all students in Massachusetts in comparable grades, over no less than a three-year period for cohorts of students;
 - ii. student performance on other standardized tests over no less than a three-year period for cohorts of students, if available, which

- demonstrates student achievement levels that are similar to statewide averages in English language arts and Mathematics for all students in Massachusetts in comparable grades;
- iii. attendance, retention, and attrition data;
 - iv. graduation and dropout data.
- (c) The applicant shall submit evidence of organizational viability, which shall include but not be limited to effective governance, effective financial management, and compliance with applicable laws and regulations.
 - (d) The applicant shall provide evidence to demonstrate that the successful school serves a student population similar to the population to be served by the proposed charter, and that the program to be offered at the proposed charter is similar to, or represents a reasonable modification of, the successful school.
 - (e) Applicants shall provide any other information as required by the Commissioner.

Each proven provider applicant submitted evidence satisfactory to the Commissioner demonstrating success in student academic performance, as well as evidence of educational program success and organizational viability. Each proven provider applicant also provided evidence of serving a student population similar to the population to be served by the proposed charter within a school or program that is similar to or a reasonable modification of the proposed program. Whenever possible, the Department's analysis included student data from Massachusetts public schools. In the case of providers, such as Big Picture Learning and Blueprint Schools Network, who were not affiliated with a Massachusetts school for the required length of time, each provider submitted the data required for schools outside of Massachusetts.

II. Criteria for Review

The criteria listed below are for all Commonwealth charter school applicants and include the criteria addressed both at the prospectus and final application stages.

I. Charter School Mission, Vision, and Statement of Need

A. Mission Statement

- The mission defines the purpose and values of the school.
- The mission informs the public about the school and the students the charter school intends to serve.
- The mission is consistent with high academic standards and student success.
- The mission is succinct and meaningful.
- The mission is reflected throughout all sections of the application.

B. Vision Statement

- The vision illustrates a compelling image of the school's future.
- The vision describes the broad academic and nonacademic goals for students that are consistent with the stated mission, academic program, and educational philosophy of the school.
- The vision describes the ways in which the school will positively impact all stakeholders in the school.
- The vision aligns with the mission statement.
- The vision is meaningful.
- The vision serves as an organizing principle for all sections of the application.

C. Description of the Community(ies) to be Served

- The application speaks to the value of the school.
- The application describes the student population that the proposed charter school would serve and the needs of that population.
- The application briefly discusses the reason for the selection of the community(ies) and the founder's ability to serve this particular area.
- The application provides a specific rationale for how this school will enhance or expand the educational options, including whether the innovative methods to be used by the proposed school differ from the district or districts from which the charter school is expected to enroll students.
- The application describes how the educational option provided by the charter school will address the needs of the student population.
- The application describes how the founding group has assessed parental support within the proposed sending district(s)/region for the proposed school.
- The application describes briefly the school's plan to provide families and community members opportunities to support the success of the school.
- The application explains why a Commonwealth charter is necessary in order for this school to exist or succeed.

II. How will the school demonstrate academic success?

A. Educational Philosophy

- The educational philosophy describes the founding group's core beliefs and values about education.
- The educational philosophy aligns with the school's mission.
- This section of the application demonstrates that the educational philosophy will serve the diverse needs of individual students.
- The application provides research (include explicit citations) on the educational philosophy and its associated educational practices demonstrates that this approach may improve the academic performance of the anticipated student population with its diverse needs, including specific subgroups of students consistent with requirements of M.G.L. c. 71, § 89 for a recruitment and retention plan.

B. Curriculum and Instruction

General

- The curriculum and instruction are consistent with the mission and educational philosophy of the school.
- The application provides research (including explicit citations) on the curriculum and instruction that demonstrates it may result in high academic achievement of the anticipated student population and its diverse needs, including specific subgroups of students consistent with requirements of M.G.L. c. 71, § 89 for a recruitment and retention plan.
- The application explains how the school will ensure that all students can access the general education curriculum.
- The application explains how the school plans to train and support teachers to address the unique needs of all students, including students with disabilities and English language learners.

Curriculum

- The application identifies which individual(s) on the school's organizational chart will be responsible for the following processes and procedures regarding curriculum.
- The application explains the process utilized to identify the curriculum that will be used by the school and provides reasons why the curriculum was chosen for the school.
- The application describes the process that will be used to align the curriculum to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (MCF).
- The application provides an outline of the curriculum that will be used by the school, *including* the content and skills to be taught in the core content areas at each grade level. Content is what students should know; skills are what students should be able to do; and the core content areas include English, reading/language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography. Four grade levels should be included in the text of the application. For proposed schools that plan to have fewer than four grade levels, please include all the intended grades in this section. Additional grade levels must be included in the attachments but will not be counted toward the page limit.
- The application describes a clear plan and curricular components that will facilitate ongoing development, improvement, and refinement of the curriculum.
- The application describes the process and procedures used to evaluate whether the curriculum is effective and successfully implemented.

Instruction

- The application describes the pedagogy or instructional methods that will be used to deliver the curriculum model(s).
- The application describes how these instructional methods support high standards of achievement and are accessible and appropriate for all students at all levels, including students with diverse learning styles, English language learners, special education students, students who enter below grade level, and other at risk students who might be targeted in order to eliminate the achievement gap.

- The application explains how the school will ensure that teachers are proficient in delivering the chosen instructional methods.
- The application briefly explains the process for teacher evaluations.
- The application describes how the school will determine the professional development needs of the staff and deliver these opportunities.

C. Performance, Promotion, and Graduation Standards

- The application provides an example of performance standards for at least one grade grouping in three areas: mathematics, English language arts, and one other subject area of your choice. It indicates to teachers, parents, and students the attributes that merit a particular letter grade or rubric score. Performance standards for student assessment are clear and easy to understand, not only for teachers and administrators, but also for parents and students.
- The performance, promotion, and graduation standards are based on high expectations, and are aligned with the school’s mission, educational program, assessment system, and the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (MCF).
- The application clearly describes the proposed school’s policies and standards for promoting students to the next grade, achievement level, or grouping level.
- The application provides examples of graduation or “exit standards” for the school’s grade groupings in three areas: mathematics, English language arts, and one other subject of the applicant’s choice. This provides reviewers with a clear sense of what students will know and be able to do at the end of the last grade of each school level.

D. Assessment System

- The assessment system is linked to curriculum and instruction and will facilitate decision-making about adjustments to the educational program and inform a staff development plan that will support the goal of improved student learning.
- The application indicates which individual(s) in the school have primary responsibility for overseeing the assessment system.
- The assessment system describes how achievement data will be collected and how it will be used.
- The application describes the school’s approach to identifying students who may be struggling or excelling, and the plans to support those students within the proposed educational program.
- The application indicates whether, in addition to administering the MCAS tests, the school will use additional standardized assessment tools to determine and report student progress, and explain why those tools were selected for the targeted population and how the data will be used.
- The assessment system includes descriptions and/or examples of assessments that are research based and are consistent with the school’s mission, broad academic and nonacademic student goals, educational program, and high expectations of students.
- The assessment system includes internal/school-developed instruments in order to measure and report student progress and why these particular assessments were selected for the targeted student population and how the data will be used.
- The assessment system includes a meaningful and practical approach for measuring student progress toward attaining non-academic goals.

- The assessment system features multiple measures of student outcomes that can be reported in terms of absolute scores, within-year student gains/losses, and year-to-year student gains/losses.
- The assessment system provides a thorough, clear, measurable, externally credible, and conceptually sound design for measuring and reporting the performance and progress of the charter school and the academic and social development of each student to all relevant stakeholders.

E. School Characteristics

- The school characteristics include the number of days school will be in session, daily hours of operation, and the way school will be organized for instruction, independent study, and extra or co-curricular activity, if any.
- The school characteristics fulfill state requirements on minimum number of school days and instructional hours. If the school would not meet the minimum number of school days and instructional hours based on the program proposed, provide justification for a waiver of the requirement.
- The application describes the grade levels at which students will be admitted to the school and the required age for Kindergarten, if applicable.
- The application describes the mechanics of the school's educational program and how it will be organized for students and faculty (multi-grade, tracking, team-teaching, etc.).
- The application describes any external programs that will be brought into the school and why.
- The application describes the teaching methods and strategies the proposed school will take for supporting students with a wide range of needs.
- The application illustrates the typical student's day from the perspective of the student.
- The application illustrates the typical teacher's day from the perspective of the teacher.
- The application describes the culture of the school.
- The application provides a clear plan for establishing a school culture and norms consistent with the school's mission, educational philosophy, and educational program and describes how it is implemented from the first day of the school's operation.
- The application describes how the school plans to involve parents/guardians as partners in the education of their children and build and maintain family-school partnerships that focus on strengthening support for the school's goals, including the school's philosophy and plans for student homework.
- The application describes how the mission, educational philosophy, curriculum and instruction, assessment system, and school characteristics are all integrated into the implementation of a comprehensive educational program.
- The final application describes a student behavior philosophy and plan that is appropriate for all students and is consistent with the school's mission and educational philosophy, is communicated to teachers, students, and parents, and is implemented from the first day of school.

- The final application includes a clear plan for gauging parental satisfaction and publicizing results.
- The final application describes a clear plan for establishing meaningful relationships or describes existing relationships with community agencies and organizations in order to support the school's educational program and serve the youth who attend the school.

F. Special Student Populations and Student Services

- The application describes the plan for a responsive, general education classroom and how the school will provide students with disabilities and/or limited English proficiency access to the general education curriculum.
- The application describes the processes and procedures that the proposed school will employ to identify, assess, and serve students who are English language learners. This includes a description of the English language development program and support services to be offered, how student identification and assessment will be conducted, the settings in which these required services will be implemented, the qualifications of individuals who will be recruited to implement these services, the plan to support SEI endorsement obtainment for core academic teachers, the FTE equivalent for each position proposed, and how the program will be evaluated. The final application includes more details about how services for English language learners will be delivered within the school's daily schedule, the titles, salaries, and qualifications of the individuals delivering the services, and the curriculum that they will use.
- The application describes the processes and procedures that the proposed school will employ to identify, assess, and provide specialized instruction to each student in need of special education services. This includes a description of support services to be offered and how student identification and assessment will be conducted and how individualized educational programs will be developed. This also includes the settings in which these required services will be delivered, the qualifications of individuals who will be recruited to deliver services, the FTE equivalent for each position proposed, and how the program will be evaluated. The final application includes more details about how services for students in need of special education services will be delivered within the school's daily schedule, the titles, salaries, and qualifications of the individuals delivering the services, and some of the methods they will use.
- The application describes the plan for a school nutrition program, including what meals and/or snacks will be served and when. The application describes how the school plans to administer the free and reduced-price lunch program.
- The application describes any ancillary and support services the school expects to offer students and families. The final application also includes the plan to hire a school nurse and his/her role in the school.
- The final application indicates the English language development program staffing levels the school intends to provide *by year* for each of your school's first five years. Include qualified individuals who will work with your school, administrators, teachers, and other staff, as well as the number of staff you propose to hire each year and their qualifications, salary, and the percentage of their time that will be devoted to English language learner education.

- The final application indicates the special education staffing levels the school intends to provide *by year* for each of your school's first five years. This includes the Special Education Administrator, as well as the proposed number of staff to hire each year and their qualifications, salary, and the percentage of their time that will be devoted to special education. It specifies the amounts of time the administrator will allocate to administrative duties and to service delivery.

III. How will the school demonstrate organizational viability?

A. Enrollment and Recruitment

- The final application indicates the number of students enrolled by grade each year over the five year term of the charter as well as maximum enrollment.
- The final application provides a specific rationale for a viable and sustainable size and growth strategy.
- The final application offers a clear link between enrollment and recruitment to the parental support outlined in the Description of Community(ies) to be Served section of the application.
- The final application includes a draft copy of the proposed recruitment and retention plan.
- The final application describes a strategy for broad outreach and recruitment including to families that may be less informed about options.
- The final application offers a student admissions plan that ensures adequate enrollment and full accessibility of the school for all eligible students.
- The final application includes a complete draft enrollment policy and admission application in the attachments and describes how the school will be ready for the required submission of enrollment data to the Department by mid-March 2014 or 2015.

B. Capacity

- The application describes how the applicant group came together to form this proposed school and why the group is united to establish the proposed charter school.
- The application explains how often the group meets, how the planning and writing process is completed, and identifies the primary author of the application.
- The application summarizes briefly within the text of the document each founder's and/or proposed board member's experience and qualifications. The experience and qualifications should demonstrate that the founders and/or proposed board members:
 - have the experience and qualifications necessary to implement the proposal;
 - demonstrate the capacity to found and sustain an excellent charter school;
 - can manage public funds effectively and responsibly;
 - include members who possess skills and experience in areas such as education, management, finance, development, and law; and
 - have tangible ties to, and broad and diverse representation from, the communities the school will serve.
- Each member of the applicant must submit a resume as an attachment to the final application. The application must indicate if a founder is a proposed board member, proposed school leader, or other school employee. Resumes should indicate the founder's prior experience as it relates to the charter application. Additionally,

- proposed board members and proposed school employees must complete individual questionnaires to further establish their understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- If the founding group includes the proposed school leader (or any other person slated for a position at the school), the application indicates the process used to determine that the individual is the best candidate for the position.

C. School Governance

- The application provides a description that explains a clear workable reporting structure and encourages an appropriate relationship between the board of trustees and the school's leadership regarding the governance and management of the school.
- The application describes the recruitment and selection processes for new board members.
- The application describes how the present proposed board coalesced to found the proposed school.
- The application describes the orientation and development process for new board members.
- The application describes the process the board will use for its own evaluation and development.
- The application includes a draft copy of the school's complete bylaws.
- The governance model presents clear roles and responsibilities of the board of trustees, consistent with public accountability, such as open meeting law, state ethics law, and charter school law.
- The final application explains how the board of trustees is reflective of, or consistent with, the school's mission and program.
- The final application identifies clear criteria for the selection and evaluation of a school leader.
- The final application clearly delineates the respective roles and responsibilities of the board and the school administration.
- The final application provides a brief job description for the chairperson of the board of trustees, including a plan for succession when term ends.
- The final application describes one policy that the founding group has established and the process for developing that policy.
- The final application establishes a viable process for policy making and ongoing board development and self evaluation.
- The application describes the plan for seeking feedback from the school staff, parents, and the larger community when setting policy.

If filing the application with a college, university, museum, educational institution, not-for-profit entity, or any other partner:

- The application provides all the required information; name of partner organization, contact person, description of the nature and purpose of the school's partnership, etc.
- The application explains how the relationship enhances, complements, and/or supports the mission and educational philosophy of the proposed charter school.

D. Management Structure

- The organizational chart encompasses all employees of the school and the board of trustees.
- The final application describes how the applicant group determined the structure shown in the organizational chart.
- The application provides a narrative that explains a clear workable reporting structure and encourages an appropriate relationship between the school's leader and administration regarding teachers, specialists and other staff members.
- The final application describes a solid plan for making key school level decisions about curriculum and instruction, student achievement, fiscal planning, and operations.
- The final application describes clearly delineated roles and responsibilities for the school's leader and other administrative staff and articulates key role distinctions with regard to student achievement, personnel, financial management, and operations.
- The final application describes the process for the development, supervision, coordination, and continued assessment of the educational content and pedagogical approach.
- The final application explains how the operations of the school will be aligned to support instructional goals and student achievement.
- The final application describes the qualifications and attributes of an ideal educational/instructional leader if that individual is different from the school leader.
- The final application includes a staffing chart and narrative staffing plan.
- The final application describes the school's plan for staff recruitment, advancement, and retention.
- The final application describes the proposed working conditions and compensation packages that will attract and retain highly qualified staff.
- The final application describes how faculty and administrators will be evaluated and by whom.
- The final application describes professional development activities for faculty and administrators.
- The final application clearly describes the teaching program of typical teachers, indicating how many hours they will be in class and what other school-related responsibilities they will have outside the classroom (e.g., lunch duty, dismissal, advisory group, after-school).

E. Facilities and Student Transportation

- The final application describes a viable process for conducting a facility search for an adequate school facility in the proposed area of service.
- The final application describes sound financing options for acquisition (purchase, lease, etc.) of a facility and any necessary renovations to meet the school's needs, to meet all local building requirements for use of the facility as a charter school, and to meet accessibility requirements.
- The final application proposes a transportation plan that will serve all eligible students and is consistent with charter school statute and regulations.

F. School Finances

(1) Fiscal Management

- The final application describes the structure and process for managing the school's finances.
- The final application describes the fiscal controls and financial management policies the board of trustees will employ to remain informed of the school's financial position.
- The final application describes how the school will track finances in its daily business operations.

(2) Operating Budget and Budget Narrative

- The budget reflects all the commitments proposed in the application through its third year of operations, including the school's mission, educational program, expected student population of special education and English language learners, and human resources.
- The budget narrative provides details to explain the projected amounts in the budget, including descriptions of administrative and instructional staff and other operating expenses.
- The budget narrative describes whether the founding group expects the school to raise additional funds and why and briefly describes any planned fundraising efforts and who will lead and coordinate these efforts.
- The budget demonstrates knowledge of the practical matters relevant to the operation of a school, is based on sound reasoning, and shows that resources will be consistently deployed to meet the school's goals.
- Both the budget and budget narrative provide evidence that the applicant has made a realistic assessment of projected sources of revenue that are adequate to ensure the fiscal viability of the school.

G. Action Plan

- The action plan includes: a timeline, action(s) to be taken, designated point person, and start date and projected completion date.
- The action plan outlines the steps that need to be taken for a successful school launch.
- The action plan is specific and consistent with the proposal's objectives.

IV. How will the school demonstrate it is faithful to the terms of the charter?

Accountability and Proposed Dissemination Plans

A. Process

- The final application describes the process the proposed school will undertake in the first year to create an effective accountability plan and identifies who will have primary responsibility for defining and overseeing the process.

B. Objectives

- This section requires three examples of accountability plan objectives for each area of charter school accountability.
- This section includes school performance objectives that are consistent with the school's mission and program.

- The school performance objectives are clear, measurable, and data driven.

C. Narrative

- The final application gives a snapshot, no more than two paragraphs, of what successes the school may have in five years.

D. Dissemination

- The final application proposes ways in which the school will be able to collaborate with school districts from which it draws students to disseminate best practices, including clear ways the charter school will be able to provide educational models, including programs, curriculum, and teaching methods that can be replicated by other public schools.