



Massachusetts Charter School

# **Accountability Guide**

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Massachusetts Department of Education  
Charter School Office  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148  
Phone: (781) 338-3227  
Fax: (781) 338-3220

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*The purpose of this Guide is to provide schools and other interested parties with information on the accountability system that is unique to charter schools in Massachusetts. Each component of the Guide provides specific information regarding a particular aspect of the accountability process. This process was conceived when charter schools were first opened in the Commonwealth and has been added to and improved upon through years of implementation.*

# Overview

Authorized by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' Education Reform Act of 1993, charter schools are independent public schools that operate under five year charters granted by the Commonwealth's Board of Education. Charter schools are usually proposed by teachers, school leaders, parents, non-profit organizations, or other members of the community.

The increased freedom coupled with increased accountability infuses all aspects of the Department of Education's oversight of charter schools, beginning with the rigorous application process that groups must go through to receive a charter. Once the Board of Education has awarded a charter on the basis of a successful **Application for a Public School Charter (step 1)**, the new charter school has the freedom to organize around the core mission, curriculum, theme, or teaching method described in the application. It is allowed to control its own budget and hire (and fire) teachers and staff. In return for this freedom, a charter school must demonstrate good results within five years or risk losing its charter.

The Board of Education is obligated by Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 71, Section 89, and regulations under 603 CMR 1.00 to conduct an ongoing review of charter schools and, by the fifth year of a school's operation, decide whether its charter should be renewed. Specifically, the renewal of a public school charter is based on affirmative information in three areas of inquiry:

- Academic program success**
- Organizational viability**
- Faithful to the terms of the charter**

Evaluation of the school's success in these three areas is based on a variety of information that is provided by the school and gathered by the Department of Education. One of the key components of this process is the school's **Accountability Plan (step 2)** which defines the school's internally set performance objectives and how progress toward these objectives will be measured. Because success will be gauged by a school's progress over time in relation to its own objectives, the Department of Education requires each charter school to submit an Accountability Plan prior to the start of its second year of operation that is clear, rigorous, and measurable. The Plan must receive approval from the Charter School Office. The plan must also define how progress toward those

objectives is measured. A new plan is then submitted with each Application for Renewal for the term of a new charter and must also be approved by the Charter School Office.

A charter school must report on progress toward the objectives stated in its Accountability Plan in its **Annual Report (step 3)** to the Board of Education and the public.

In response to this self-report of performance required by statute, the Department conducts a one-day **Site Visit (step 4)** to the school during the second and third years of its charter.\* Site visit teams are comprised of individuals with educational and organizational expertise and are most often led by a member of the Department's Charter School Office staff. The primary purpose of a site visit is to corroborate and augment the information contained in a school's annual report, especially regarding stated progress relative to Accountability Plan performance objectives and to gather evidence on progress the school is making toward meeting the standards articulated in the Common Criteria for Charter School Performance (Criteria). In addition, the team is looking for information on a series of questions and areas of enquiry described in the Site Visit Protocol. Site Visit Reports are issued by the Charter School Office..

By August 1 prior to the fifth year of its charter, a school must submit an **Application for Renewal of a Public Charter School (step 5)** in order to receive a new charter for five more years of operation. Following the Department's guidelines, each school presents affirmative evidence regarding why a new charter is deserved, addressing the three areas of inquiry that guide charter school accountability plus an additional question about the school's plans for the next five-year term if its charter is renewed.

In response to its application for renewal, each school undergoes a three to four-day **Renewal Inspection (step 6)** commissioned by the Department, designed to corroborate and augment the school's Application for Renewal, and its progress toward meeting the Criteria and Accountability Plan goals. The renewal inspection team's final report provides independent and expert judgment regarding the school's performance and serves as one more piece of evidence that the Charter School Office, the Commissioner of Education, and the Board of Education consider regarding the renewal of a school's charter.

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\* Each charter is granted for five years. Year 2 of a charter may be a school's second, seventh, or twelfth year of operation.

The **commissioner's recommendation regarding renewal (step 7)** is presented to the Board of Education. Based on this recommendation, **the Board of Education votes to renew or not renew a school's charter (step 8)** for another five-year term.

# Steps in the Accountability Process

## ***Step 1: Application for a Charter***

The Board of Education awards charters only to applicants who have met the criteria published by the Department of Education. The questions that guide each application, and the criteria against which applications are judged, are found in the *Application for a Public School Charter*. Applicants must first submit a 20-page prospectus that outlines the key features of their proposed school. In the prospectus, each founding group is asked *what* it is proposing, from the school's mission and educational approach to its intended structures of accountability and governance.

If a prospectus meets the Department's review criteria, the founding group is then invited to submit a 50-page final application. The final application asks a founding group to provide further detail both about *what* it is proposing as well as information about *how* the applicant group will ensure the successful implementation of the proposal.

Each prospectus and final application is reviewed by a team of volunteers from within and outside the field of education. These teams are led by the Department's Charter School Office staff. Additionally, founding groups that submit final applications are interviewed for further information and clarification. School district leaders and the general public are invited to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each application, whether in writing or at public hearings held around the state.

Based on the Department's review, the commissioner makes recommendations to the Board of Education regarding the awarding of charters to applicant groups that have successfully met the stated criteria. Successful applicants are granted charters at the Board of Education meeting each February

### ***Step 2: Accountability Plan***

The three areas of inquiry that guide charter school accountability assume that a school's charter articulates measurable objectives for performance. To ensure such articulation, and because school success will be gauged in part by a school's progress over time in relation to its own objectives, the Department of Education requires each charter school to submit, before the start of its second year of operation, an Accountability Plan. This Plan must articulate the performance objectives it has established and define how progress toward objectives is to be measured. Such objectives cover each area of accountability – academic success, organizational viability, and faithfulness to the terms of the charter.

The charter school office provides limited guidance and consultation to each school for the development of its Accountability Plan, and approves each plan once it is sufficiently clear, coherent, comprehensive, and consistent with high academic standards. The school and its reports are governed by the Plan on file with the Department, and any changes to the Plan must be approved by the Charter School Office.

### ***Step 3: Annual Report***

A charter school must report on progress toward the objectives stated in its Accountability Plan in a yearly report to the Department of Education and the public. An Annual Report, issued on or before August 1 each year, reports on the school's progress toward meeting the goals and objectives articulated in its Accountability Plan. Annual Reports also include information on the strategies used to make progress toward its goals as well as unique aspects of the school's program. Annual Reports serve as the basis of each school's public record of performance, and they must be sent to the Department of Education, the superintendent(s) and school committee chairs(s) of the district(s) from which a school draws students, legislative representatives, and must be available to parents.

### ***Step 4: Site Visit***

During the second and third years of a school's operation, every charter school undergoes a day-long site visit governed by the *Site Visit Protocol*. The site visit team is usually led by a member of the Department's Charter School Office and includes visitors from the community with educational and organizational expertise. If additional information is needed during the school's fourth year, a special fourth year visit focused on areas of concern may be conducted.

The primary purpose of a site visit is to corroborate and augment the information contained in a school's Annual Report, especially regarding progress relative to the school's Accountability Plan. In addition, information is gathered regarding the three areas of inquiry of charter school accountability.

Each site visit team is comprised of visitors with collective expertise in teaching and organizational leadership such as teachers, school leaders, business leaders, and community representatives. Each site visit team follows a common protocol that includes the observation of classes and interviews with the school's board of trustees, school leader(s), teachers, students, and parents. Each site visit team produces a written report summarizing its findings guided by sub-questions included in the protocol. Site visit reports become part of each school's public record of performance.

### ***Step 5: Application for Renewal***

Each school must submit a written application for renewal during the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, or 5<sup>th</sup> year of its charter. Schools are able to apply for renewal any time from March 1 of the third year of the charter until August 1 after the fourth year. If a school does not submit an application by the August 1 deadline, its charter will expire at the end of the next school year.

Following guidelines set forth in the *Application for Renewal of a Public School Charter*, an application for renewal should be an articulate, affirmative response, based on clear, credible evidence, to the three areas of inquiry that guide charter school accountability. It must also offer compelling answers to questions about the school's plans for the future, including a strong Accountability Plan for the next charter. Schools should provide a clear presentation of the school's progress in meeting Accountability Plan goals as well as answer each question asked in the application. The document should be a sound, well-supported explanation of why the Board of Education should renew a school's charter and will become part of the school's documents to which they are held accountable.

### ***Step 6: Renewal Inspection***

Once the Application for Renewal has passed a minimal review of its comprehensiveness, clarity, and coherence, a team of expert school inspectors is appointed to conduct a 3-4 day **Charter School Renewal Inspection**. This visit is to corroborate and augment the school's Application for Renewal and gain additional information that will help the Department of Education judge the school's success in answering affirmatively to each of the areas of inquiry guiding charter school accountability. Such teams are composed of a group of educational and organizational experts who follow the *Charter School Renewal Inspection Protocol*. The inspection team's findings, presented in a final report, provide the Charter School Office and the Commissioner with new, independent, and expert judgment regarding the school's performance.

***Step 7: Commissioner’s Recommendation Regarding Renewal***

The Renewal Inspection Report, Application for Renewal, Annual Reports, Site Visit Reports, performance on state assessments, financial records, and other information present in the school’s file provide the evidentiary basis for the Commissioner’s review and recommendation regarding the renewal of each school’s charter. This material is reviewed by the Department of Education and a *Summary of Review* is written summarizing the evidence for the Board of Education. Based on this review, the Commissioner will recommend to the Board of Education that it renew, renew with conditions or probation, or not renew a school’s charter. The Summary of Review and the Renewal Inspection Report are presented by the Commissioner and Department of Education staff to the Board with the Commissioner’s recommendation.

***Step 8: Board of Education’s Vote Regarding Renewal***

Based on the Commissioner’s recommendation, the Board of Education will hold an initial discussion on the school’s application for renewal at a public Board of Education meeting. The Board will discuss the application one meeting but not vote until its next scheduled meeting. Renewal decisions are made at the latest by the February Board meeting during the fifth year of a school’s charter.

# Helpful Documents

## General Charter School Information

- Massachusetts School & District Profiles  
<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>
- Massachusetts Charter School Questions and Answers  
<http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/qanda.html>
- Massachusetts Charter School Technical Advisories  
[www.doe.mass.edu/charter/tech\\_advisory/](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/tech_advisory/)

## Massachusetts Laws and Regulations

- MGL Chapter 71 § 89: Charter Schools  
[http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/statute\\_regs.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/statute_regs.html)
- Massachusetts Regulations on Charter Schools 603 CMR 1.00  
[http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/statute\\_regs.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/statute_regs.html)

## Charter School Application Process

- Application for a Public School Charter  
[www.doe.mass.edu/charter/app/](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/app/)

## Ongoing Oversight

- Guidelines for Writing Charter School Accountability Plans  
[http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/guides/acctplan\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/guides/acctplan_guidelines.pdf)

## Financial Oversight

- Charter School Recommended Audit Guide & End of Year Financial Report  
[http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/charter06\\_eoy.html](http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/charter06_eoy.html)
- Recommended Fiscal Policies and Procedures Guide  
<http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/charter/guide05.pdf>

## Charter School Renewal Information

- Application for Renewal of a Public Charter School  
[www.doe.mass.edu/charter/pdf/renew\\_app.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/pdf/renew_app.pdf)
- Charter School Renewal Inspection Protocol  
[www.doe.mass.edu/charter/pdf/protocol.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/pdf/protocol.pdf)
- Charter School Renewal Inspection Reports  
[www.doe.mass.edu/charter/reports/inspect.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/reports/inspect.html)