



Meetinghouse Solutions

“Strong Boards, Strong Schools”

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The Top 10 Mistakes of Charter School Founding Boards

by Marci Cornell-Feist



The Top Ten Mistakes of Charter School Founding Boards

1. Not understanding the charter

- Too often the charter is the vision of one lead founder and the rest of the board understands only the biggest brush strokes of the charter.
- Every board member needs to understand the charter promises, the methods proposed to deliver the promises, and have a clear sense of how these promises will be measured.

2. Not having a clear plan to conduct oversight of the academic program

- An effective charter school board is not comprised primarily of educators; it should have a few people with broad educational management experience, but needs to primarily have the skills that the school staff will never have.
- Although most of the board members are non educators, they need to fully understand the academic plan and partner with the school leader to develop a clear and consistent way to measure academic performance.

3. Not enough expertise to conduct proper financial oversight

- The number one reason why charter schools fail is financial mismanagement. This is generally not due to malfeasance but to the lack of financial sophistication on the board.
- It is vital that there is more than one board member with strong financial skills on the board. And, in addition, it is vital that the financially savvy board members ensure that the rest of the board can comprehend the annual budget and monthly financial reporting, and is aware of the short and long-term financial projections and their implications for the health of the school.

4. Original Board Composition

- Very often the initial composition of the board that is created for the charter application is flawed.
- More often than not these initial boards:
 - Lack a level of objectivity, by being close personal friends and colleagues of the lead founder.
 - Are comprised of board members who were place on the board to “lend their names and credibility” and generally are not prepared to carry out the hard work of governing a start-up charter school.
 - Were unclear about the time commitment needed to govern a start-up charter school.
 - Are lacking the right mix of skill sets and tangible ties to the community.
 - Have difficulty adding non-founders to the board. Many founding board members put in an incredible amount of time to make the chartering happen and in the process create an expectation of such a significant time commitment that it becomes impossible to find non-founders willing to

join the board. Sometimes the founding board is such a tight knit group that it is hard for new board members to fit in and find ways to contribute.

5. Board size

- Many founding boards are too small, generally 5-7 people.
- A high functioning charter school board needs to be larger; I recommend ultimately a board 11-15 people, with a board of perhaps 9-11 by the time the doors open, in order to have public credibility, the right mix of skills, and enough people to have functioning committees capable of accomplishing significant work in between meetings.
- It is a natural tendency to want to start with a small, tightly-knit and tightly-controlled group, but there is so much work to do in the early years that a board of 5-7 is a mistake.

6. Lack of previous governance experience

- Many founding boards run into problems because they do not have enough board members with previous governance experience and because their school leader has no previous governance experience.
- In addition, the school leader needs to have the time and the desire to assist in creating effective governance.

7. Lack of functioning committees

- One of the key transitions that need to take place as the board moves from a founding board to a sustainable governing board is having functioning committees. In the founding phase it is often necessary to do most of the work as a committee of the whole. But by the beginning of the first year of operation it is imperative that functioning committees emerge to tackle strategic issues in greater depth, and with more specific expertise, than the full board will have time for during regularly scheduled board meetings.
- To have an effective board it is essential that substantive work is done by committees in between meetings.

8. Being too dependent on a lead founder

- The founding of most charter schools is led by one dynamic individual. Sometimes this person is the chair of the board, but more often than not they become the School Leader.
- The board needs to transition to taking the lead in partnership with this leader and to ensure that they are not just being led by, or solely reacting to, the direction of this leader.

9. Underestimating the amount of fundraising that needs to happen and the board's role in fundraising

- Most urban charter schools need to raise a significant amount of private funds to augment the school's per pupil funds. Fundraising supports facility acquisition and renovation, after school programming, tutorials, and summer programs—all the “value-added” services needed to take students performing significantly below grade level to a point where they are at or above grade level.

10. Lack of urgency

- “We're just a start-up”, “It's only the first year”, “It's only the second year”, are common refrains used by charter school founding boards. Although it is true that the board and senior management need to give time for things to gel, it is important for founding boards to know that experience tells us if a charter school is not excelling by the end of its second year, it probably won't get there. You only have one chance to form a strong culture of accountability and academic success. It is important to be relentless from the get go! Learn from the most successful schools that have gone before you.

