Starting Strong:
Best Practices in Starting a Charter School

Peabody College
Vanderbilt University

Commissioned by
State Charter Schools
Commission of Georgia

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Background

- Research Partners:
  - SCSC and Peabody College at Vanderbilt University

- Purpose of Study:
  1. to identify academic and operational practices commonly employed by high performing start-up charter schools, and
  2. to share these best practices with petitioning groups, existing schools, and other external stakeholders.

Methodology

- Three main sources of data:

1. Existing literature on best practices
2. Interviews with charter support organizations
3. Interviews with founders of <u>successful</u> charter schools in Georgia*, Tennessee, and Florida

Methodology

- Successful = Academically Successful
  - Schools demonstrated positive student achievement gains

- Several state charter schools included among Georgia schools:

1. Fulton Leadership Academy
2. Ivy Preparatory Academy Gwinnett
3. Pataula Charter Academy

Findings

- 11 domains of best practices that represent important aspects of operating a high-achieving charter school.

  1. MISSION
  2. GOVERNANCE
  3. LEADERSHIP and CULTURE
  4. ACADEMIC PROGRAM
  5. BUSINESS OPERATIONS
  6. RESOURCE ALLOCATION
  7. FACILITIES
  8. TALENT MANAGEMENT
  9. EXTERNAL RELATIONS
  10. ACCOUNTABILITY
  11. RECRUITMENT

Best Practices

1. Focus on the *MISSION*
   - Every decision should lead back to fulfilling the mission
   - Growing slowly helps to perfect the mission

Mission Statement

1. ## A Mission Statement Should:
   - Be Specific
   - Clearly define what will be accomplished
   - How the school will meet the students' academic needs
   - And, show what differentiates this school from others

Best Practices

2. Establish Effective _GOVERNANCE_

- Select board members who agree with the mission and have time to start a school.
- Select board members who can offer vital expertise and resources on all operational areas – and have the time.
- Clarify the board's role in governance – and not management – of the school.

WHO DOES WHAT?

Board's Responsibility	School Leader's Responsibility
■ Evaluate school and leader	■ Make curricular decisions
■ Approve budget	■ Hire staff
■ Create school policies	■ Manage day-to-day affairs of the school
■ Fundraise	■ Interact with parents

Best Practices

3. Establish Effective *LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE*
    - Skills for starting a charter school aren't learned in a book and there are many definitions of an effective leader.
    - Leaders will be measured and judged by the work of those they hire; so hire well and treat employees well.

Leadership and Culture

3. Important _LEADERSHIP SKILLS_

   - RESILIENCE
   - FLEXIBILITY
   - EXCELLENT COMMUNICATION SKILLS
   - HUMILITY
   - AMBITION
   - ABILITY TO MOBILIZE GROUPS

Best Practices

4. Develop the *ACADEMIC PROGRAM*
    - Academic programs should go hand in hand with the mission of a charter school.
    - High expectations and rigorous materials help charters get off to a strong start.
    - Balance purchasing existing programs and creating all materials in-house.

Best Practices

5. Managing <u>BUSINESS OPERATIONS</u>
   - Effective business operations are vital and should be carefully planned
   - Verification of finances requires multiple people.
   - Utilize the board's expertise on operations and finance.
   - Be strategic about contracting out services

Segregation of Duties

Authorization &Approval	Processing & Recording	Making Payments	Receiving Funds	Review
Approving PO's	Recording Transactions	Cutting Checks	Depositing Cash	Annual Budget Review
Signing Checks	Reconciling Bank Accounts	Initiating Wires	Depositing Checks	Selection of Auditor
Approving Budgets			Receiving Cash	Review of Monthly Financial Statements
Approving Wires				
Approving Recorded Transactions				

Best Practices

6. ## Acquiring and Allocating *RESOURCES*
   - Federal and state grants can be worth the time investment.
   - Community foundations, fundraisers and corporate sponsors are other ways to obtain resources.
   - Maintain flexibility – and a reserve fund.

Best Practices

7. Acquiring *FACILITIES*

- Location matters.
- Use board members, nonprofits and grants to search for and acquire facilities.
- Think outside the box.
- The first building doesn't have to be the permanent location.
- For local charters, know your legal rights

Facilities

7. Which have charter schools used as a facility?
   a) Church
   b) Strip mall
   c) Modular units
   d) Former car dealership
   e) College campuses
   f) All of the above

Best Practices

8. ## Managing *TALENT*
   - Use the school's mission and vision to attract teachers.
   - Compensation should be competitive with the district.
   - Recruit from everywhere and think about alternative teaching programs.
   - Expect staff turnover.
   - Multi-talented people can fill multiple roles.

Managing Talent

8. Attracting Talented Teachers through Incentives
   - Offer Bonuses
   - Alternative Compensation Systems
   - Professional Development Opportunities

Best Practices

9. ## Managing *EXTERNAL RELATIONS*

   - Be transparent and clear with parents at all times.
   - When dealing with parents, schools are in the business of customer service.
   - Emphasize local community partnerships.

Best Practices

10. Performance Monitoring and *ACCOUNTABILITY*

- Accountability to the charter authorizers and state testing set the bar externally.
- Use interim assessments to monitor progress internally.

Academic Assessments

Which of the assessments below are INTERNAL assessments and which are EXTERNAL assessments?

- Iowa Test of Basic Skills
- Georgia Milestones Assessment
- Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Assessment

Performance Monitoring & Accountability

10. SCSC Comprehensive Performance Framework
    - Academic performance
        - Achievement and growth
    - Financial viability
        - Near-term viability and long-term sustainability
    - Operational compliance
        - Governance and legal compliance
    - http://scsc.georgia.gov/scsc-comprehensive-performance-framework

Best Practices

11. Recruiting *STUDENTS*

- Stay true to the mission
- Pound the pavement
- Take a stance on transportation

How is the SCSC using this information?

- Sharing with petitioning groups, existing school, external stakeholders.
- Incorporating best practices into SCSC petition application and other processes as applicable.

Conclusion

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- Available on the SCSC Website:
  https://scsc.georgia.gov/sites/scsc.georgia.gov/files/related_files/site_page/Starting_Strong_final.pdf