
The Charter School Growth Manual: Expert Tips and Pitfalls to Avoid as You Grow



Table of Contents



01. Introduction	03
02. The Growth Stages of Charter Schools	05
03. The Start-up Stage	08
Challenges & How to Conquer Them	
Pitfalls to Avoid	
Start-up Tips from Experienced Charter School Leaders	
04. The Growth Stage	20
Challenges & How to Conquer Them	
Pitfalls to Avoid	
Growth Tips from Experienced Charter School Leaders	
05. The Sustainable Maturity Stage	31
Challenges & How to Conquer Them	
Pitfalls to Avoid	
Sustainability Tips from Experienced Charter School Leaders	



01. Introduction

Welcome! Whether you're just beginning the process of starting up a charter school, looking to expand, or you're trying to prioritize your next steps, you've come to the right place.

At Charter School Capital, we believe in the power of charter schools and their leaders to deliver quality education and foster success in their students. Over the past 10+ years, we have partnered with hundreds of charter schools to help them access the capital they've needed to achieve financial and operational stability.

Along the way, we've had the privilege to learn from charter school leaders and educators about what works and what doesn't—and we've come to see that the hurdles they face tend to be remarkably consistent. Although charter schools are champions of educational diversity, they typically face similar sets of challenges and encounter the same potential pitfalls, regardless of their focus, location, or population.

For this guide, we turned to our wide network of charter school experts for best practices and strategies for success at every stage of maturity. All of the advice in this book comes from experienced charter school leaders who have been where you are now—they understand what you're facing and the pitfalls to avoid.

We hope the growth strategies here include useful tips for you and your team on developing a strong charter, building culture and community support, and boosting your financing and facilities practices to support your growth.

Questions about financing
your charter school?

Get in touch with us!

LIVE CHAT

<https://charterschoolcapital.org>

EMAIL

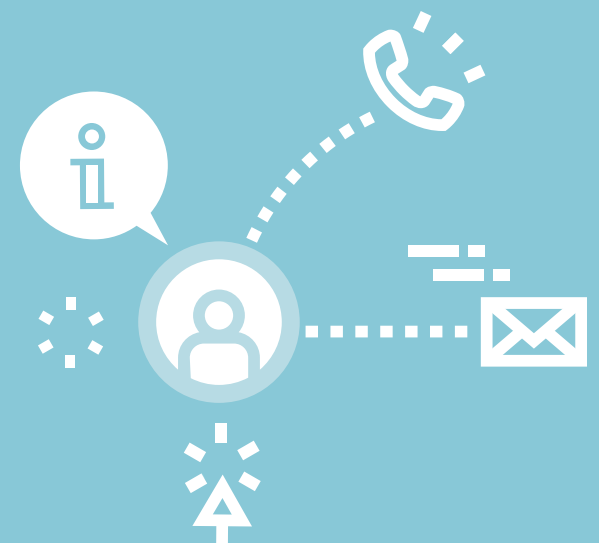
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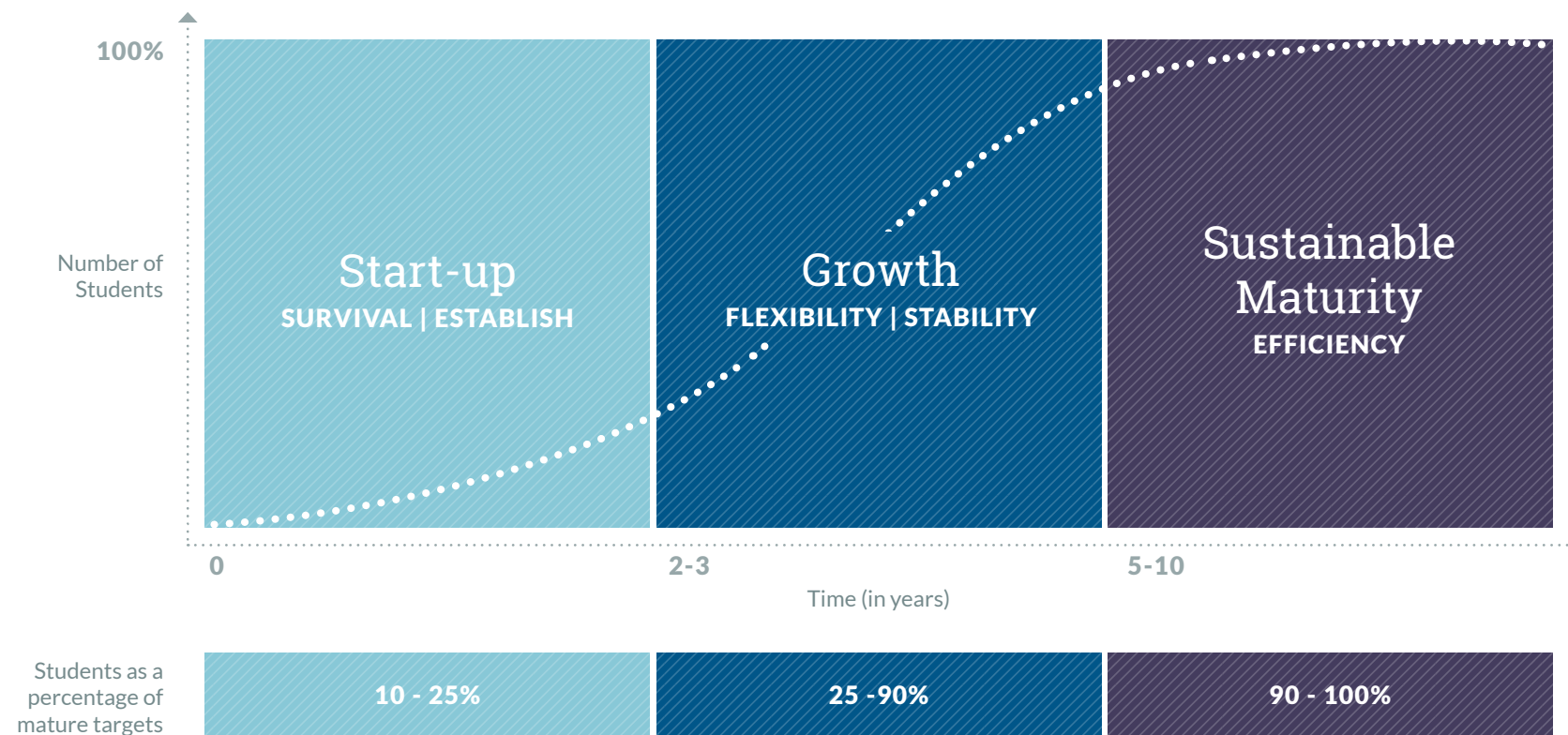




02. The Growth Stages of Charter Schools

The Growth Stages of Charter Schools

Charter schools tend to fall within three main growth stages: **start-up**, **growth**, and **sustainable maturity**. Segmented by the years in operation and number of students served, their challenges and best practices can be grouped based on these groups.



Why Charter Schools Close

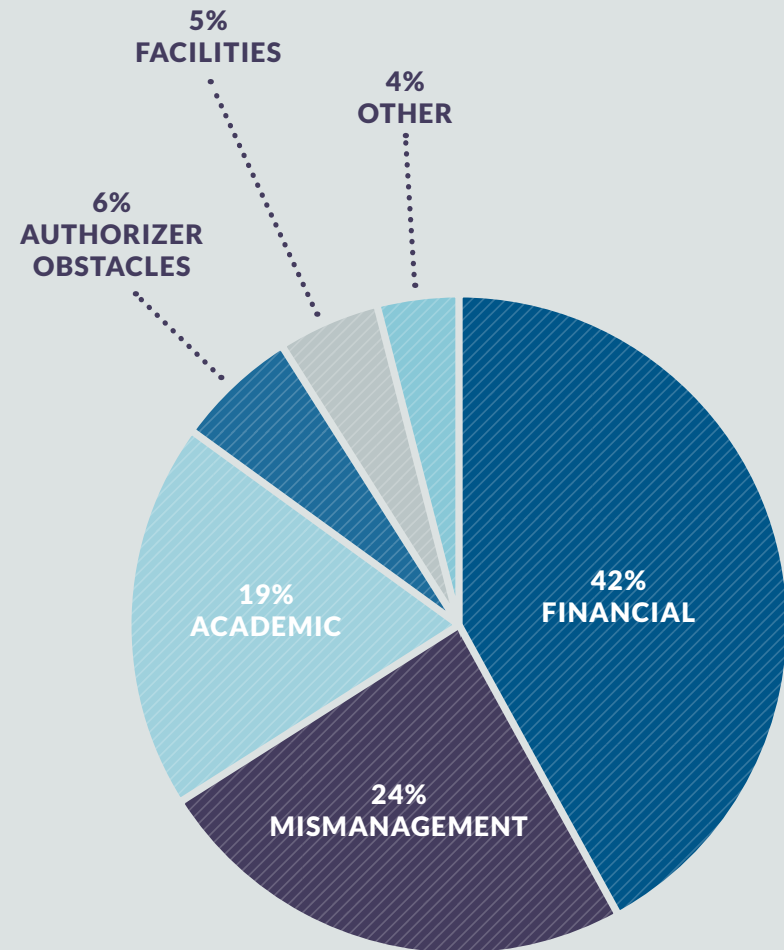
Before we jump into proven strategies for charter school success, it's important to recognize why charter schools fail. According to **The Center for Education Reform**¹, 66% of charter school failures are due to financial reasons (42%) and mismanagement (24%).

We can infer that, in most of these cases, schools closed because of a lack of funds or because the funds weren't managed well. Fewer than 20% closed due to academic issues.

Another telling figure: 87% of charter schools that failed did so in the first three years.

These figures can serve as useful guideposts:

- 1 Focus on raising capital and managing it well.
- 2 Be highly strategic about your priorities in the first three years.



¹The Center for Education Reform, *The State of Charter Schools: What We Know and What We Do Not*, December 2011, https://edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/StateOfCharterSchools_CER_Dec2011-Web-1.pdf



03. The Start-Up Stage

The Start-Up Phase



THE GOAL

Survive, enroll students, get to know and get known by the community.



PRIMARY CHALLENGES

- Securing financing beyond state funding
- Obtaining facilities
- Building community awareness, finding students
- Establishing an academic program
- Staffing to meet your school's demands

In this section, we'll cover strategies for success in the start-up stage, and then we'll dispel common misconceptions and provide best practices from experienced charter school leaders.

The start-up stage includes the very first tasks required to form a charter school: hiring, launching, and running until 10 - 25% of your target enrollment has been achieved. Without a doubt, this is the most challenging and stressful stage for charter school leaders. If you're in this stage now and you're feeling overwhelmed, you're not alone.

As mentioned previously, 87% of charter schools that fail do so in the first three years, and making it past this stage is critical to long-term success. You must have a smart strategy, prioritize wisely and form valuable partnerships as you help your students succeed academically.



BEST PRACTICE

The charter school community is large and welcoming. Draw on the expertise of other leaders (even your "competitors") who have been where you are now.

Start-up Challenges & How to Conquer Them

These challenges are consistent among the vast majority of charter schools, regardless of location, population, and academic focus. If you find that you're spending a lot of time and energy on chores unrelated to these challenges, ask yourself if these activities are truly essential or if they are taking your time and resources away from necessary tasks.

CHALLENGE NO. 1 | SECURING FINANCING

Early on, you'll need more than funding, you'll need financing. Be as creative and diverse as possible as you go after donations, grants, and other financing options.

Submit applications for as many grants as you can, from public and private sources. The U.S. Department of Education **has a number of available charter school grants²**, for starters. But be sure to look for state, local, and private foundation grants as well.



BEST PRACTICE

Recruit a volunteer to your funding team with experience in grant writing. Use original responses and ensure that final submissions have a cohesive voice and answer any required questions.



Build strong relationships with financiers and ask partners such as Charter School Capital to write letters of support to demonstrate you have help with your cash flow.

Keep in mind that many grants are reimbursement grants, so you'll need separate capital to actually make the purchases and then submit your expenses for reimbursement. You may wait months or years to receive reimbursement from the grant.



EXTRA CREDIT

For some grants, such as **California's Public Charter Schools Grant Program**, you can volunteer to be a grant reviewer as long as you're not submitting a grant application in that round. You'll learn the rubric and the metrics by which grants are evaluated; you'll have the opportunity to read many grant applications; and you'll learn the difference among applications that are outstanding, applications that are so-so, and applications that are a no-go.

² U.S. Department of Education, Charter School Grants, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/csp/index.html>

CHALLENGE NO. 2 | OBTAINING FACILITIES

There's no way around it, finding a home for your school is tough. If you're just beginning the process, you likely aspire to have a private facility—that's a hard goal to achieve, and it may not be worth the effort at a time when you have so many other challenges to tackle. You may have to settle for a facility that's less than ideal. Keep in mind that it's not permanent and finding your school's long-term home will become easier once you're out of the start-up stage.

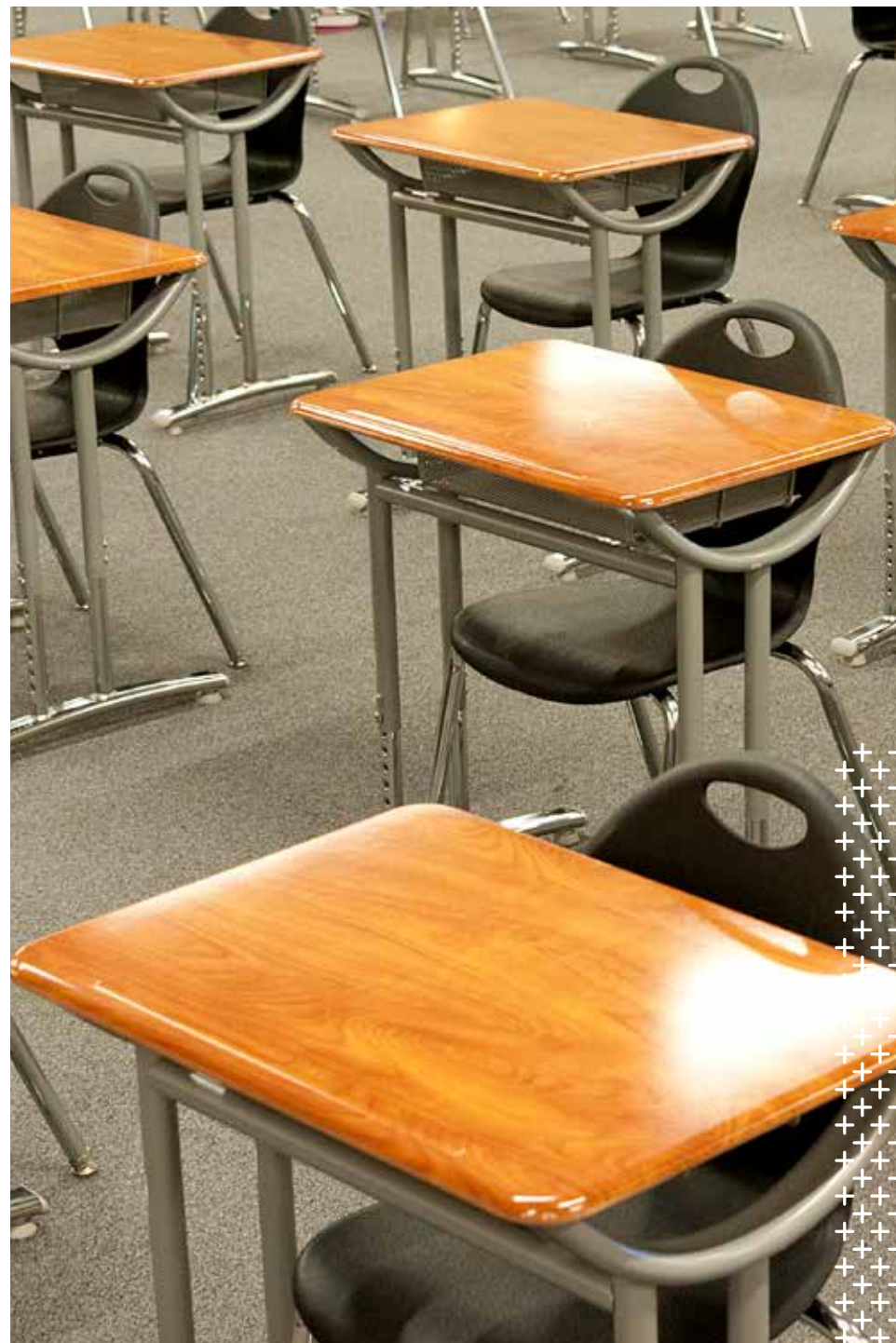


BEST PRACTICE

Remember that your initial facility is temporary, establish realistic criteria for your facility, and manage the expectations of your founding team.

For many charter schools, the facilities decision comes down to a choice between leasing space from a private landlord or from the local school district. There are pros and cons to each, and every school will need to decide what's best for them.

In some states, such as California, there are laws that require local school districts with unused facilities to provide them to local charter schools. School districts typically compete with charter schools, and the facilities may be older and in less-than-ideal condition. On the other hand, you can't beat the price—district-owned facilities may be free or come at a very low cost. But it also means that the charter school isn't completely independent from the school district.



CHALLENGE NO. 3 | COMMUNITY AWARENESS

Create awareness among your community and make friends and allies with business leaders, vendors, and community groups. You'll build valuable relationships—and share your mission with hundreds of parents.

The point of your charter school is, of course, to provide a quality education for your students. But if families don't know about your school, you'll have trouble meeting your enrollment targets. Aim high! Build community support in such a way as to open with a wait list. It's a simple metric, but it's a great way to show the world at large that parents believe in you and that students want to attend your school.

Create a strategic plan for growing community support, including milestones and benchmarks. Don't start from scratch—tap into your founding team, community members, or volunteers who have marketing expertise.

TIPS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

COMMUNITY EVENTS

A consistent presence at community events, such as farmer's markets, seasonal festivals, holiday parades, and cultural and arts events. This may include a table or a booth—but be creative; the goal is to stand out.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Draw on the expertise of a founder or volunteer who does this full-time. Facebook and Instagram are great ways to engage the community, but only if you have regular, engaging, and sustained updates.

INFORMATIONAL MEETINGS

Provide regularly scheduled informational meetings for parents to learn about your mission and vision. If you don't yet have facilities, consider using meeting rooms at your district office or reserving free spaces at a library or community center. Provide webinars and in-person presentations at different times of day to cater to working parents.



TIPS FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

BUSINESS OUTREACH

Be sure to reach out to the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Clubs. It's never too early to build strong relationships with members of your business community.

FACILITY TOURS

Once you have a school, conduct frequent tours to show the public what they're supporting.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Tell your story to anyone who will listen including local news, podcasts, bloggers, and well-connected community leaders. You'll build goodwill and reach parents who may not have previously considered a charter school for their children.



BEST PRACTICE

Local Talk Radio — host a show about education or students in the community.





CHALLENGE NO. 4 | ESTABLISHING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR YOUR ACADEMIC PROGRAM & TRACKING METRICS

For charter schools, academic accountability begins with the charter application itself.

Your application is a promise to future students, parents, and the community. When your charter is granted, you'll need to report metrics on a regular basis to show that your school is fulfilling those promises and meeting the requirements set forth in your charter agreement—even before you have a baseline of standardized test scores and Adequate Yearly Progress measurements.

Certain metrics may be required by state standards such as Common Core, but the authorizer will also want to see how well your students are tracking toward the accountability standards spelled out in the charter. To some extent, these will vary by school. For example, if your academic model is built around Project-Based Learning or leadership, your school may track very different academic metrics than a school built around language immersion or STEM.

Accountability and metrics aren't just for your authorizer; be sure to share them widely and often with staff, parents, and students as well. By measuring a diverse set of meaningful metrics from the beginning, you'll establish a foundation for accountability that goes far beyond standardized test results as you expand.



BEST PRACTICE

Your school's plan for accountability is a reflection of how unique it is. Establishing academic rigor and describing the metrics you'll use to measure progress is required in the charter application. Differentiate your school from others here!

CHALLENGE NO. 5 | STAFFING

From the very beginning, ensure that your teachers and leaders are aligned to your mission and vision. It's never too early to recruit—**Edjoin** and **Indeed** are good places to start. And be sure to reach out to charter school associations, which often have job boards. Many charter schools in the start-up stage may rely on outsourced services for back-office functions such as accounting, custodial support, and food services. Companies that provide these services are already experts at what they do, so outsourcing can be a great tactic to operate more efficiently in the first couple of years.



BEST PRACTICE

Including both teacher and parent signatures with your petition goes far. Show your authorizers that you already have teachers who are excited to work at your school.



Start-up Stage

Pitfalls to Avoid

From talking to hundreds of charter school leaders over the years, we've discovered several misconceptions that tend to be common among many founding teams. On the surface, each of these misconceptions seems to make sense. But with the benefit of experience, we can see that they often lead to wasted time, energy, and resources.

MYTH NO. 1 | THE FOUNDING TEAM IS IN CHARGE OF CREATING BEST PRACTICES

Good news—best practices for charter schools already exist (we've included quite a few in this guide), and you can put them to use right away. Put your founding team in charge of creating vision, forming partnerships and implementing best practices.

Be wise about crafting your founding team. Ensure that you include a variety of educators, parents, and community influencers with varying backgrounds and perspectives. Above all, make sure that the founding team shares a common vision for the school.

Rather than tasking your cofounders with creating best practices, have them connect with partners that can provide those best practices and share what other schools are doing. These can include practices on everything from fostering your school's culture and engaging parents to building a curriculum and providing the right kind of support for the students you serve.

Best practices can come from the business community as well as from other schools. Draw on the expertise of your legal team for governance, policies and contingency plans; back-office providers such as accounting firms for budgeting tools; charter school associations for advice on things like staffing; and financing partners such as Charter School Capital for fundraising and growth strategies. And don't hesitate to reach out to established charter schools in your community—they have gained a wealth of knowledge from their experiences.

Another key task for your founding team: ask them to read as many charter school petitions as they can, including those that were approved and those that were not. You'll start to notice patterns. For example, many successful petitions include letters of support from elected officials at every level. Reaching out to politicians for these letters is a great use of your founding team's time.



BEST PRACTICE

Reach out to local universities and schools of education for advice on your programing and petitions—this can also be a way to recruit academics to your founding team.

MYTH NO. 2 | WHEN IT COMES TO PETITION APPROVAL, A STRONG EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM IS THE ONLY THING THAT REALLY MATTERS

Believe it or not, there are several factors at least as important as your education program. Keep your petition short, but above all, show that:

- 1 You have a team that can implement your program.
- 2 You have the financing to carry it through.
- 3 You have a facility.

Approach your authorizer before submitting the final petition. Start building those relationships well in advance so you can get feedback on your petition before formally submitting it. Be inspired by successful petitions but be sure to write your own; avoid the temptation to copy and paste.

Although several individuals may contribute to the petition, ensure that the final submission has a consistent, cohesive tone with one writing style.



BEST PRACTICE

Avoid using too many acronyms or bureaucratic language—petition reviewers are regular people with limited attention spans.

Be sure to include pre-approval letters from financiers with the petition, as well as letters of support from community leaders, elected officials, and academics.

MYTH NO. 3: “IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME”

You can have a great school, with an innovative curriculum and the most dedicated staff in the world, but if nobody knows about it, enrollment will suffer. Instead, focus on building strong community support. The previous section includes tips for engaging your community—anything you can do to share your story helps.

Ultimately, community support means more than having a strong turnout at authorization hearings, though that’s important, too. It also means having strong relationships with business leaders, vendors, community groups, local media, and other charter schools.

If all goes well, you’ll be operating in your community for decades to come, and you’ll need your neighbors behind you every step of the way—including well before it comes time for authorization hearings. The ultimate goal is to have a wait list before you open your doors.



BEST PRACTICE

Consider speaking for free at events such as Rotary Club meetings and community groups—it’s a great way to give back to the community even as you create allies and position yourself as an expert.



Six Start-up Tips from Experienced Charter School Leaders

Now that we've dispelled common misconceptions, it's time to talk best practices. These are all drawn from charter school leaders who have successfully conquered the start-up stage.

1 STUDY AND MEET WITH SCHOOLS THAT ARE DOING THINGS WELL

How are other schools helping their students achieve academic success? Are there ways to adapt those tactics to your curriculum? You can learn a lot, and it's always a good idea to maintain positive relationships with other educators no matter what.

2 MASTER A FEW THINGS AND DO THEM REALLY WELL

Don't try to be a master of everything—it's impossible. Have a strong outline of the implementation plan proposed in the charter petition. What are your goals in the first few years? It's better to have a plan and be straightforward about incremental goals than to promise a lot of things and to fail at most of them.

3 BUILD GENUINE AND ROBUST RELATIONSHIPS

With parents, teachers, leaders, vendors, and external constituents. Never ever create an enemy. Always be honest and genuine, even with your detractors. Foster strong relationships with your vendors and with businesses that could become your vendors later on. You'll have emergencies and you'll need things you hadn't planned on in a hurry. Vendors will be more likely to come through in a pinch if they already feel a personal connection with the school.



EXTRA CREDIT

Build relationships with groups who may take a stance opposed to charter schools, such as teacher's unions. You can learn what it is they are resistant to, and you can disarm them by forming a connection.

4 PAY EVEN CLOSER ATTENTION TO STUDENT PROGRESS DATA

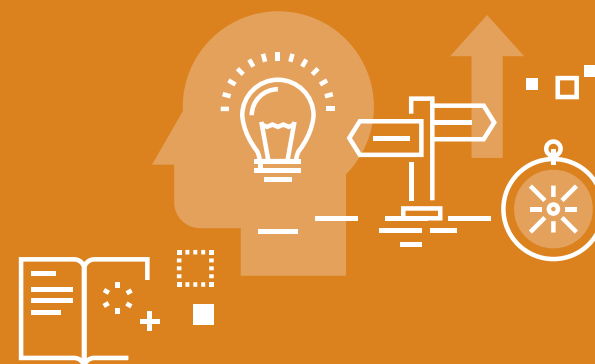
Everyone will want to see the data, and you may not have much of it at the beginning. Think about the data you do have and how you can report it in the most compelling, meaningful way possible. In addition to the metrics you track to maintain your charter and to report to regulators, find out what's meaningful to parents and report that out: attendance, time-to-completion, classroom hours, pages read, math problems solved, miles run. Make sure to share the data with students, too.

5 PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE BUDGET

As needs change and shift, review the budget and make sure it aligns with your goals. Always plan for the worst-case scenario and have a plan for dealing with cash flow issues. Build a solid relationship with your financial partners; treat your budget as a living document; and know how you'll pay for everything. Above all: never miss payroll.

6 DO NOT WAIVER IN YOUR BELIEF OR YOUR MISSION

It's likely that you will encounter many people who will try to convince you to change your mission and vision to suit their specific needs. You can't please everyone. Your mission and vision should serve as your guideposts when you're faced with tough decisions; they shouldn't be the thing you modify every time you're faced with a tough decision.





04. The Growth Stage

The Growth Stage



THE GOAL

Prove academic success while scaling up and staying flexible.

Schools in the growth stage experience drastic changes. Like a teenage student, your school will look entirely different at the beginning of this stage than it does at the end. Unsurprisingly, the theme of the growth stage is constant change. Schools within 25-85% of target enrollment are typically within the growth stage.



PRIMARY CHALLENGES

- Delivering on your promise to your students and to the community
- Flexible financing
- Scalable facilities
- Proving academic efficacy and improvement
- Scalable operational support



Growth Stage Challenges & How to Conquer Them

Many of the challenges of the growth stage are related to the goal: helping students succeed while scaling and staying flexible. This may sound easy enough, but the truth is, it's a challenge for most organizations to **stay flexible and resist entrenchment** as they grow.³ Flexibility has to be more than a mindset; it also has to be a component of a strategic plan as well as an aspect of your school culture.

CHALLENGE NO. 1 | PROVING ACADEMIC EFFICACY AND STUDENT IMPROVEMENT

The growth stage is all about advancing levels of student performance. Even if your approach to academics is highly individualized, use school-wide metrics to prove efficacy and show improvement. As described in the previous section, this is often required for schools to maintain their charters. If you established a system of academic accountability early on, you'll be able to show how well your program is working with a variety of relevant metrics that go well beyond standardized test scores. Adequate Yearly Progress and standardized test scores are important, but be sure to use other measurement tools to gauge your students' growth throughout the year.

Turn a critical eye to your materials—are there gaps? If something is missing, find creative ways to teach the lesson to your students so they don't fall behind the required curriculum.



BEST PRACTICE

Data is for everyone! Put your school's metrics front and center so parents, staff, and students can see them every day. This will raise awareness and help to share accountability.

³ Mulford B. (2005) Organizational Learning and Educational Change. In: Hargreaves A. (eds) Extending Educational Change. Springer, Dordrecht

CHALLENGE NO. 2 | FINDING FLEXIBLE FINANCING

Schools in the growth stage still need lots of financing options. Your financial needs will be different than they were in the start-up stage, and to some extent, they'll be harder to anticipate. After all, the financial needs of brand-new schools can be fairly predictable. But as you grow, your needs will change based on your facility requirements, your curriculum, and the number of students you have. Do you need a new gym? Are your students requesting more AP classes? Are you growing faster than you expected?

It's possible that you'll have sufficient funds from operating revenue to support a certain amount of expansion—but how much? The key is to match your capital to your operational needs, and obtain flexible funding streams.

It's likely that your school will need to continue to apply for grants, and if they are reimbursement grants, you'll need separate capital for the initial expenditures: As described previously, reimbursement grants require the school to first make purchases and then submit the expenses for reimbursement—a process that can take months or years.



BEST PRACTICE

Consider your operational needs and the capital you'll need to achieve them. Seek a variety of flexible funding streams, including grants, financing, and donations.



CHALLENGE NO. 3 | SCALABLE FACILITIES

In the growth stage, many schools still haven't found the ideal facility that can meet all their students' needs under one roof. For example, a school with classrooms in an office building may use a nearby public park for recess, a neighborhood community center for PE, and a private school's facility for music classes.



BEST PRACTICE

Be open-minded and creative about your facilities. Many schools in the growth stage use a modular approach and rely on a combination of facilities for different programs.

The configuration of each school will be different, but one thing is certain: your existing facilities will need to be expanded and upgraded as your academic program evolves and to meet parent and student expectations. Art, engineering, music, and science facilities all have specific requirements—and they can be absolutely crucial for attracting students and achieving enrollment targets.



CHALLENGE NO. 4 | DELIVERING ON YOUR PROMISE TO THE COMMUNITY

Earlier, we recommended that schools in the start-up stage devote time and resources to creating allies and goodwill within the community. If you did everything right, leveraged marketing efforts, and had some luck, you may have even opened with a wait list. But don't rest on your laurels just yet. Now it's time to fulfill the promises you made to your community.

As described earlier, a big part of this means providing a great education for your students and fostering their academic success. It also means continuing to have a presence on social media and volunteering at community events and speaking at Chamber of Commerce meetings. These are opportunities for you to share your students' successes as well as to continue to build allies.



BEST PRACTICE

Use every opportunity to share meaningful stories and demonstrate improvement through metrics in order to continue to build goodwill in your community and spread your message.



CHALLENGE NO. 5 | SCALABLE OPERATIONAL SUPPORT

In the beginning, you may have outsourced certain functions, such as accounting, custodial support, and food service. You may also have used decentralized spreadsheets and documents to manage data and keep track of all the school's information. A patchwork of spreadsheets and vendors can quickly become tough to manage.

In the growth stage, most schools invest in more sophisticated systems and easier ways to manage and access data. It may still be financially wise to outsource certain functions, and you'll likely find that you have a combination of in-house and external operational support.

This [white paper \(PDF\) from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice](#) weighs the pros and cons of outsourcing.⁴

This [slide deck \(PDF\) from New York City Charter School Center](#) shows which functions can reliably be outsourced and which should stay in house.⁵

⁴Mathis, WJ and Jimerson, L. A Guide to Contracting Out School Support Services: Good for the School? Good for the Community, Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice, https://greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Mathis_ContractingOut.pdf

⁵Recruiting and Hiring Business Staff, New York City Charter School Center, http://www.nyccharterschools.org/sites/default/files/resources/recruiting_and_hiring_business_staff.pdf



BEST PRACTICE

Use technology to become more efficient. Look for apps and tools that can automate repetitive tasks, save time for your staff, and create efficiency.



Growth Stage Pitfalls to Avoid

Growth always leads to new challenges—many of which are valuable opportunities to learn and improve. Just as in the start-up stage, it's helpful to devote your efforts wisely and not repeat the mistakes of others who have come before you.

MYTH NO. 1 | AFTER THE THIRD YEAR, ALL WILL BE IN PLACE AND SMOOTH SAILING

Remember how we said the theme of the growth stage is constant change? The truth is that almost nothing can be taken for granted in the growth stage. For example, standardized tests can create curriculum changes. Staff turnover and growing enrollment can lead to cultural shifts. There is a learning curve to any new system or software. Try to embody the value of lifelong learning, while maintaining high expectations and staying flexible.

As you grow, you may find that your culture, mission, and vision start to fade. The founding team that started the school likely aren't the people who are now running the school, and there may even be multiple locations in different cities.

Be strategic and proactive about keeping everyone connected and focused on the school's mission and vision.



BEST PRACTICE

Post your school's mission and vision prominently in every classroom. Have every staff member meet at set times throughout the year not only for professional development but also to reinforce the sense of professional community, mutual support, and culture.

MYTH NO. 2: PERFORMANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY REQUIREMENTS WILL STAGNATE

Academic benchmarks are always changing—and so is your population of students and, to a certain extent, staff. Even if you arrive at what seems to be the most perfect academic program in one school year, it will need to be continually tuned and adjusted to keep up with curriculum requirements, help students succeed, and support improvements.



BEST PRACTICE

Plan to adapt and build it into your schedule so it stays top of mind, rather than an afterthought. Review your school's data frequently and adjust your instruction based on the students.

MYTH NO. 3 | PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ISN'T A PRIORITY

Professional development is a way of life for teachers, and at a charter school it should be a way of life for every staff member.

This is key for maintaining culture and building unity, as well as for creating job satisfaction and supporting continual academic improvement.



BEST PRACTICE

Gather together every staff member - from custodial staff to principals - for several days before school starts for some “sacred time” workshops, collaborative decision-making practice and to remind everyone of the school’s history and culture.



Four Growth Tips from Experienced Charter School Leaders

1 NURTURE YOUR SCHOOL'S CULTURE AS MUCH AS YOU NURTURE YOUR STUDENTS

We've already talked about professional development and mission and vision, which are all good ways to shape culture. Ultimately, culture is always a product of the people involved. It can be tough to retain quality leaders and teachers, especially because many charter schools have longer days and academic years than public schools. Teachers have to truly believe in the mission from the outset in order to put in those extra days and hours for years to come. It's essential that the people you hire are aligned with your mission.



EXTRA CREDIT

For the first few weeks of the school year, prioritize culture rather than instruction as you reestablish student routines and remind everyone of the school's values and mission.

2 PRIORITIZE CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING

In order to have motivated staff committed to continuous improvement, professional development has to be front and center. This is also an investment in continuity. When people feel like they are getting better at their jobs and have room for growth, they are more likely to stay.⁶

3 FOCUS ON PROVIDING INDIVIDUALIZED INSTRUCTION TO YOUR STUDENTS AND ON DATA ANALYSIS

These aren't contradictory! Every educator knows that one of the best ways to improve the data is to meet each student where they are and provide them with the support necessary to improve and succeed—regardless of your school's curriculum and goals. Of course, school-wide metrics are the best evidence that individualized instruction is working. Review the metrics frequently, share them widely, and make them everyone's responsibility.

⁶Messmer, Max. "Four Keys to Improved Staff Retention," Strategic Finance; Montvale Vol. 88, Iss. 4, (Oct 2006): 13-14.

4 DEVELOP SYSTEMS FOR YOUR OPERATIONS TO MAINTAIN CONSISTENCY AND EFFICIENCY

Researching, investing in, and mastering new systems is time consuming and expensive. The efficiencies you'll realize down the road will more than make up for the pain of adoption. If you think you don't have time to figure out a new software to manage your finances, you really don't have time to wrangle all the Excel spreadsheets you have been using.





--- **05.** The Sustainable Maturity Stage

The Sustainable Maturity Stage



THE GOAL

Reinvest for continual student improvement; expand to new locations.

Schools that have reached sustainable maturity are at 90 - 100% of target enrollment. They are focused on improving academic programs and getting more efficient across the board, from accounting systems to recruitment processes. Sustainable schools have earned certain advantages: there are a consistent number of newly-enrolled students every year, most of whom are in the same gateway grade, e.g. kindergarten or sixth grade; and budgeting and financing are more predictable.

Well-established schools still have challenges: curriculum requirements are always changing and facilities will always need to be upgraded; staff will still need to be hired; and professional development prioritized. It's important to be adaptable, budget-conscious, and to continue to think strategically about the future of your school.



PRIMARY CHALLENGES

- Your students' continual academic improvement
- Finding the best rates on financing
- Attractive facilities
- Becoming part of the fabric of your community



Maturity Stage Challenges & How to Conquer Them

Even if a school is operating successfully, the legislative environment, academic standards, and facilities will always be changing. There's no point at which you'll be 100% dialed-in. On the upside, you'll have the experiences, resources, and stability to reinvest in programs for your students and achieve longstanding goals.

CHALLENGE NO. 1 | YOUR STUDENTS' CONTINUAL ACADEMIC IMPROVEMENT

As we've mentioned, your students' continual academic improvement is a goal without a finish line. That's the way it should be! Standards will always be changing, methodologies will continue to evolve, and students' and parents' expectations will change as well. But for schools in the mature phase, you're finally in the position to think about exceeding expectations, rather than filling the gaps. For the first time, most of your students will be returning, and you no longer have to focus on recruiting 30 - 40% more students each year. This frees up time and budget for new projects.

Is it time for a state-of-the-art science center? Or a first-class music program? Strategic investments in your facilities and programs can distinguish your school, attract new families, and spur academic gains.



BEST PRACTICE

Effective professional development programs can go a long way toward keeping your staff motivated, enthused, and on the cutting edge of educational developments.



CHALLENGE NO. 2 | FINDING THE BEST RATES ON FINANCING

For charter schools that have attained sustainable maturity, some things do get easier, and financing is one of them. Revisit your charter, consider your goals as a school, and be realistic. What do underwriters like Charter School Capital look for? What is a healthy balance sheet? What makes an organization a good investment? What major improvements could you realistically make at this point that would go the furthest toward helping your students' academic success?

The good news is that mature schools have lots of options for financing, so look at costs as the primary metric—which financial institution will offer you the best rates? Make lenders compete for your business.



BEST PRACTICE

No-strings-attached philanthropic donations are fantastic, but they're best for one-time purchases like a new auditorium or a ball field. For day-to-day operations, aim to rely exclusively on state and federal money.



CHALLENGE NO. 3 | ATTRACTIVE, AFFORDABLE FACILITIES

Many charter schools that have attained sustainable maturity choose to invest in their ideal facility—a school with every program under one roof. Or maybe the benefits of your current location (e.g. convenient to public transportation, low costs) outweigh certain drawbacks (e.g. modular facilities, having the school district as a landlord). Either way, upgrading facilities, furniture, and equipment is a great use of capital for mature schools.

Whether you invest in a purpose-built school or in retrofitting another building, this will be a substantial financial outlay. But having an attractive, well-designed facility is an excellent way to better serve students, attract new families to your school, and to continue to deliver on your promise to the community.



BEST PRACTICE

Remember the relationships you've built with business leaders in the start-up and growth phases? At this point, your partnerships and allies should be so strong that you'll have no trouble finding developers who will help with any upcoming expansion or construction projects.

Your school will be viewed as a reliable investment, and your leaders will be seen as trustworthy partners



CHALLENGE NO. 4 | BECOMING PART OF THE FABRIC OF YOUR COMMUNITY

And speaking of your community, a mature charter school now has the opportunity to become a cornerstone and leader in business, arts, and civic organizations. How can your students play a prominent role in the community? Think about school-wide volunteer days, food and clothing drives, or hosting a talent show that showcases your students and raises funds for a local hospital or shelter—and generates positive local media coverage. How can you position your staff as community leaders in addition to expert educators?

Can teachers present at local meetings or conferences? If your school has extracurricular clubs, how can they give back to the community? Volunteering is a great way to demonstrate your values as a school and to authentically share your story



BEST PRACTICE

Don't hesitate to promote the ways that your students and staff are giving back! Share their efforts on your website, the school newspaper, and with local media.

CHALLENGE NO. 5 | IS IT TIME TO EXPAND?

When your charter school becomes sustainable, there may come a time to decide whether to reinvest surplus funds into current programs or in new schools. What does scaling up look like to you and your team? Is it more important to provide all the bells and whistles for your current students, or to spread your mission, vision, and culture to many more students? There's no right answer, and there are tradeoffs either way.



BEST PRACTICE

Seek outside advice from experts. You'll want to weigh costs and opportunities surround questions such as:

- What is the cost of recruitment? (Do you have a waiting list?)
- What if you exceed the capacity of your facility?
- Will you need to hire more teachers or support staff?
- What are the financing costs associated with raising money?

Maturity Stage Pitfalls to Avoid

The most common pitfalls for mature charter schools all have the same cause: the expectation that things will get easier at a certain point. While the challenges may be different, they will always exist.

MYTH NO. 1 | BUYING INTO THE SNOWBALL EFFECT

At some point, all of the work you've done to support your students' academic growth, build culture, provide professional development, and achieve financial stability will achieve a critical mass and take on a life of its own, like a snowball rolling downhill. Right?

Wrong.

If you're in an earlier stage of growth, it can be tempting to assume that, at some point, everything will just work the way it's supposed to. The truth is, every school needs constant nurturing and guidance, no matter how mature and established.

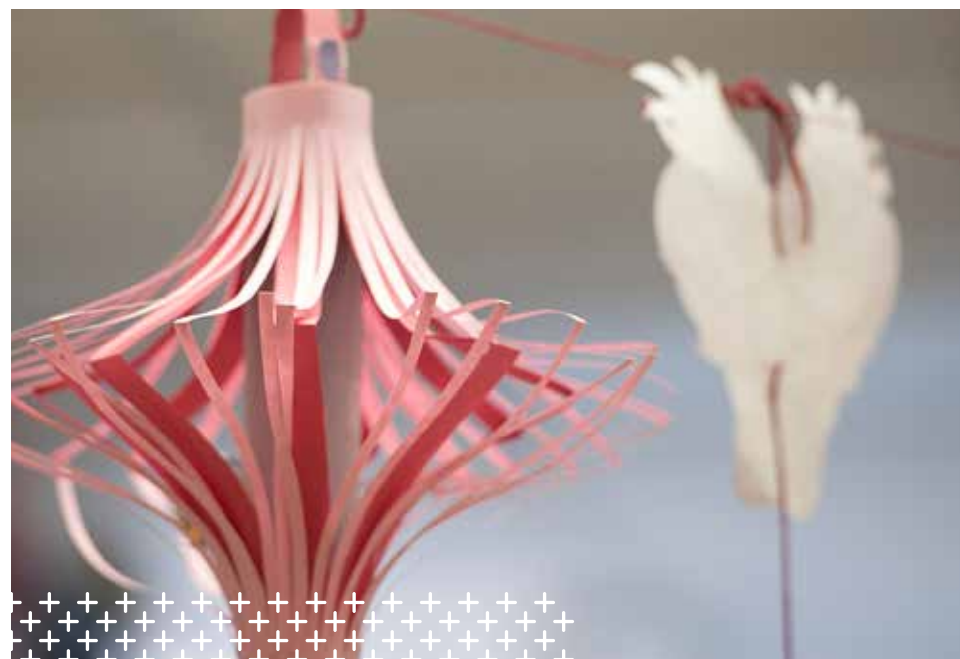
On the finance side, budget and cash-flow will need to be monitored; teachers will need to be hired; and unexpected expenses will occur. Automate bookkeeping tasks whenever possible, but make a point to review finances on a regular schedule.



BEST PRACTICE

If raising the bar every year begins to feel exhausting or repetitive, consider devoting an academic year to a certain theme, for example, a school value such as empathy or courage.

Use the theme to guide culture, academic, and professional growth programs for both students and staff throughout the year.



MYTH NO. 2 | IT'S FINALLY TIME TO CASH IN!

There will never be “enough” capital. Even if you’ve achieved 100 percent of your target enrollment, you may still have financial obligations to lenders, vendors, and partners, or you may still be waiting for funds from a reimbursement grant.

Your school will always be faced with tough financial choices: whether to reinvest in existing programs for current students or start new schools to serve hundreds more students; whether to invest in a playground or a gym; whether to upgrade computers or classroom furniture.

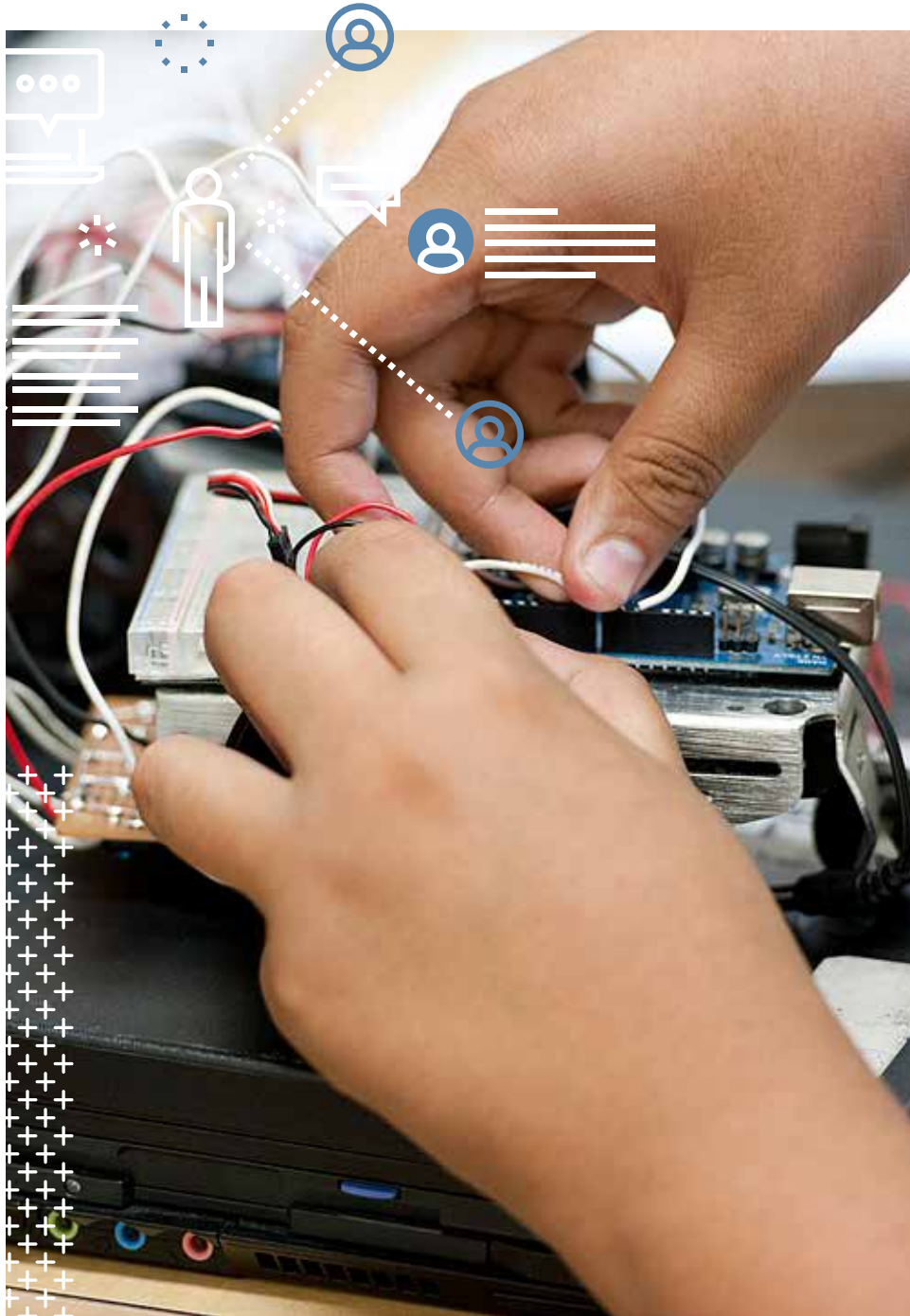
Ask students, staff, and families what they’d like to see, and consider the wider needs of the community. Would a playground be a great addition to the neighborhood at large? Could a new auditorium be used for charitable events or after-hours classes for adults? Being a good neighbor is an effective way to spread your message and continue to be part of the fabric of your community.



BEST PRACTICE

Consider this: What does a sustainable school look like in terms of academics, operations and financing? Create long-term goals, then work backward. If you can’t answer that question right now, enlist your team to work through it together. Not only will you create goals to work toward, you’ll also create a framework for financial priorities in the coming years.





MYTH NO. 3 | CHALLENGES DECREASE AS YOU SCALE

Even though a mature school has certain advantages over schools in the start-up and growth stages, that doesn't mean it faces fewer challenges. Instead, the challenges change. Chief among them are organizational entrenchment and having an effective, motivated team that continually embodies your school's values.

Don't rely on the hiring process to produce a great team. Take responsibility for shaping high-quality instructors in order to facilitate the school's continued growth. For example, pair rookie teachers or those new to the team with veteran teachers in order to create strong relationships and ensure that every teacher embodies your school's values.



BEST PRACTICE

Make sure to build problem-solving time into your strategic plan for each academic year. Rehashing issues at staff meetings doesn't cut it.

Adapt an existing framework⁷ for resolving conflicts and making decisions, make sure everyone understands the ground rules and has a chance to be heard, and explain the rationale behind the ultimate decision, including pros and cons.

⁷A decision-making framework that can be adapted for your school. "Decision-Making Frameworks," An Ethics Primer, <https://www.nwabr.org/sites/default/files/DMF.pdf>

Six Sustainability Tips from Experienced Charter School Leaders

1 BE MINDFUL OF PIVOTAL MOMENTS

An active board member retires, a storm renders three classrooms unusable, a well-loved teacher passes away, you establish and staff a brand-new language department. Whether positive or negative, it's impossible to predict every circumstance that can disrupt a school's operational rhythm and culture. The important thing is to acknowledge the disruption when it occurs and to have a plan to maintain operational and cultural continuity for your students no matter what.

2 STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT = STABILITY

Mature-stage schools are past the point of increasing enrollment by 30 - 40% every year, and that's great news. But remember: Strategically increasing enrollment can be an effective way to ensure financial and operational stability. If you have staff and space in your facility, weigh the financial costs and benefits of recruiting a small number of students to every grade, in addition to the incoming class of kindergarteners, sixth graders, or ninth graders.

3 CONTINUE TO CULTIVATE A DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE

Ensure that everyone, including students and parents, knows the goals for the academic year and can access school-wide metrics whenever they like. Keeping the goals and the metrics top of mind will help to keep everyone focused and let you know if you're meeting key benchmarks along the way.

4 CELEBRATE YOUR SUCCESSES AND VIEW YOUR FAILURES AS STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITIES

Celebrate every goal that's achieved, award that's won, and staff member that receives recognition. But look at the failures, too. That's where your opportunities for improvement lie. Analyzing failures can be a great way to begin next year's strategic plan.

5 DEVELOP PILLARS THAT DEFINE THE CULTURE THAT YOU WANT TO HAVE

On some level, culture is always aspirational—and that’s good. Look back at your charter; have you fulfilled the promises you made at the outset? Where do you want your culture to be in ten years? Sit down with your team and think about the values at the core of who you are now and who you want to be in the future. Choose four or five pillars so students and staff can remember them, and give public recognition to any individual who goes out of their way to embody a value.

6 ASSESS ALL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS REGULARLY

We’ve all been there—using a billing system that makes you grit your teeth or sitting through half a dozen interviews with unqualified candidates. At any school there will be frustrations on occasion, but schedule time to review and replace faulty and time-wasting systems whenever possible.



Charter School Capital helps charter schools obtain capital for growth, expansion, and operational needs like:

- Expansion and growth of programs and people
- Budget shortfalls and delays (deferrals, holdbacks, etc.)
- Education program enrichment
- Expanding and opening new schools
- Developing new programs
- Facilities enhancements and new facilities
- Technology upgrades
- New equipment
- Technology in the classroom
- Staff hiring and development
- Transportation needs

For more information, get in touch with us:

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