

Developing Schools for Sustained Growth and Success

Consider guidelines for developing successful schools.

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Charter schools—with their community-centric educational missions and alternative curricular approaches—can be attractive options for families. However, although many charter schools are thriving, others are closing, failing to perform to academic standards or according to their charter. In Washington, D.C., 20 new charter schools

opened between 2012 and 2017, but 21 charter schools closed.

The success or failure of charter schools—indeed of all schools—depends on academic planning and performance, financing, operations, facility planning and programming, and, of course, leadership. With thoughtful, strategic planning and management, schools have a better chance of succeeding.

Wants and Needs

When planning programs, schools must be strategic and thoughtful: having prepared a list identifying their *wants*, they must then prioritize that list according to their *needs*. Such identification and prioritization can be accomplished through a needs assessment process that looks at financing, capacity analysis,

current and future enrollment, facility programming, academic program, and site constraints, among other factors. Through this process, school officials can draft the ideal program that advances the school's mission.

Limited project resources may become a challenge to implementing a program that includes all of the wants. Take the case of a construction project. At the outset, limited resources to consider could include start-up funds, real estate acquisition, and site logistics, like zoning compliance. Prioritizing its needs and wants helps a school navigate those limitations.

Financial limitations can threaten a school's ability to fulfill its mission. For example, if a charter school's mission stresses the importance of physical education and sports, the academic curriculum, extracurricular programs, and building facility must all support that mission.

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However, the available site or available funds may be insufficient to build a gym or a playing field. In that case, the school would have performed a needs assessment and might have found that this challenge is not totally daunting. Through the process, decision makers would have known, in this example, that such a physical space is core to the school's mission and cannot be compromised.

Creative solutions applied to the available site (i.e., design, logistics, etc.) might have made using that site feasible. Or, the mission could still be realized within the financial limits through strategic partnerships with community-based organizations to allow collaboration and shared spaces.

The Financial Curve

Sometimes, financial deficiencies are outside school leaders' control. Other times, however, they can be avoided with better planning. It is important to develop a detailed master budget from the start of the project and closely monitor and manage it through project execution and beyond.

Early financial planning also provides the opportunity to explore creative financial solutions to meet program needs within limited or identified funding (i.e., shared exterior and interior spaces via a mutually beneficial agreement). With thoughtful and strategic financial planning, stability and success are more likely.

The Stakeholders

Building a new school in the community or renovating an existing one affects the community on many levels.

Consequently, many internal and external stakeholders will want to be included in critical decision making. It's important to clearly identify at the outset of the project the key internal and external stakeholders and their roles in the decision-making process.

A communications plan is critical to determining the flow of information (i.e., what information will be shared or received, in what format and when) to and from the identified stakeholders.

Ensure that internal stakeholders who are involved in the decision-making process have all the relevant information, facts, options, and potential effects up front so they are empowered to make the right decisions.

For external communications, identify the community members who will be most affected. Knowing in advance who the advocates and the opposition will be is also helpful. Understanding the latter is especially important, because knowing the potential challenges beforehand affords the opportunity and time to build on positive feedback or to mitigate identified risks.

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For example, if the community takes issue with the school's transportation or traffic control, a planning group can work with the local transit authority to add bus lines, move routes, or devise a unique solution and develop a detailed plan.

Community engagement at the right time and in the right way leads to long-term alliances and connections, enabling schools to thrive.

Balanced Plan

Last but not least, maintaining balance is essential. Wants, needs, space, and function hold different weights. Leaders must keep those moving parts balanced and functioning optimally.

Balancing the plan does not mean compromising institutional values and mission. Rather, it means being thorough, detailed, thoughtful, and strategic in the planning and execution of the project.

Challenges will always arise during project planning and execution, and difficult decisions must be made to keep the project going successfully. Decision makers must keep these key factors in mind throughout the process in order to find short- and long-term success.

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