

Key Questions for Reviewing Virtual Charter School Proposals

Following are some key questions that authorizers should examine when evaluating virtual charter school proposals. These questions address major functional areas as well as essential questions that authorizers should ask of applicants for any kind of charter school. This is not a comprehensive list of questions to ask of virtual charter applicants, but simply some questions designed to help authorizers evaluate school quality and capacity in light of the distinctive attributes of virtual schooling.

Of course, it is not enough simply to ask a wide range of probing questions; authorizers should also be satisfied with the quality, thoroughness, and integrity of responses applicants provide. Authorizers will need to develop their own application questions and applicant guidance in accordance with state law, as well as their own policies and strategic priorities. In doing so, authorizers should follow general guidance in NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing concerning quality charter application processes and decision-making. See <http://www.qualitycharters.org/publications-resources/principles-standards>.ⁱ

Governance

- How did the founding group come together to form the school? Does the board demonstrate the capacities and commitment to serve as public stewards and fiduciaries of the school? Does the board have requisite knowledge of online learning?
- If the governing board would contract with an education management organization (EMO), charter management organization (CMO), or other education service provider (ESP) to operate the school, how did the board research, vet, and select the provider?
- Does the board have the capacity, independence and commitment to oversee the management contract (and curriculum contract, if separate) effectively and hold the contractor accountable for performance, including terminating the contract(s) if necessary?ⁱⁱ (See *Box*)
- Can board meetings be conducted “virtually” (e.g., conference call, videoconference or Web conference) under state law? How will the school provide meaningful public access?

NACSA Principles & Standards for Quality Authorizing

Elements for Applicants Proposing to Contract with Education Service or Management Providers

Applicants proposing to contract for education services or management should be required to provide:ⁱⁱⁱ

- evidence of the service provider's educational and management success;
- a draft (or existing) service/management contract setting forth proposed key terms, including roles and responsibilities of the school governing board, the school staff, and the service provider; the services and resources to be provided; performance evaluation measures and mechanisms; detailed explanation of compensation to be paid to the provider; financial controls and oversight; investment disclosure; methods of contract oversight and enforcement; and conditions for contract renewal and termination; and
- disclosure and explanation of any existing or potential conflicts of interest between the school governing board and proposed service provider or any affiliated business entities.

(See also NACSA *Principles & Standards*, pp. 22-23, for essential provisions for charter contracts that rely on third-party management for school operation.)

Targeted Student Population

- What is the geographic community to be served?
- What kinds of students or learning needs does the school aim to serve? Is this targeted population likely to succeed in a 100% online learning environment?

Curriculum & Instructional Model

- Does the program offer adequate depth and breadth, with a solid research base behind it?
- To what degree – specifically how – is the program aligned with state standards and tests?
- What is the research or evidence base showing the effectiveness of the school design and instructional program for students similar to the targeted population?
- Will the school have a regular daily or weekly schedule? If not, describe how a student's daily and weekly activities will be determined. How will the school define and monitor each student's learning schedule, activities, and progress?
- Describe the lessons and activities to be offered online and offline. (Authorizers should examine a thorough demo of online lessons and how they are reinforced by direct teacher interaction.)
- Does the program offer a variety of approaches to address unique student needs or learning styles?
- How does the program implement Response to Intervention (RTI)? How does it differentiate support to students both through online content and direct teacher interaction? How does it track delivery of specific interventions and measure growth?
- Is there adequate flexibility in the online learning program to allow for adjustments in the length and delivery of lessons?
- What is the school's system of course credits?
- How will the school provide appropriate services to English language learners, as well as special education and related services to students with disabilities?
- What cooperative learning opportunities such as field trips, study sessions, group activities, or meetings with other students and parents/guardians will the school offer?

Assessment and Data Management

- Describe the types, quality, and frequency of assessments the school will employ. How frequent are feedback loops, and how are they associated with evidence of mastery of state performance standards?
- How – and how frequently – will the school track and report assessment data to the authorizer, parents, and the

public? (Authorizers may require a certain frequency of reporting for oversight purposes. If so, applicants should demonstrate commitment to meet those requirements.)

- How will assessment results be used by teachers and communicated to students and families?
- How – and how frequently – will the school conduct parent-teacher conferences?
- What is the school's plan for state testing, including logistics of testing facilities, and is it likely to meet state testing participation thresholds? How will the school administer required state assessments to all students in a proctored setting?
- How will the school define, monitor, verify, and report full-time student enrollment and attendance, student participation in a full course load, credit accrual, and course completion?
- How will the school define, monitor, and verify student progress and performance in each course through regular, proctored assessments and submission of coursework?
- What are the school's systems for managing student-level data; using student data in the classroom to personalize student learning; communicating data to teachers, parents, and students; and reporting data to the authorizer and the public?
- Are there effective systems and procedures for validating the authenticity of student work and accurate attendance and enrollment reporting?
- Does the school governing board own – and have unfettered access to – all school and student data? Is there a daily, weekly, or monthly archive that makes up-to-date data available to the board at any time? (This is necessary in the event of contract termination but a good practice at all times.)

Special Education

- Does the applicant group demonstrate deep understanding of special education requirements and have a solid plan for meeting them, including how the school will provide special education and related services to students with high-incidence disabilities? What is the proposed operator's experience with providing special education in an online environment?
- What special education expertise will the school have on staff?
- How will the school manage individualized education program (IEP) meetings and the process of modifying the IEP as may be necessary for a student's transition to a virtual learning environment?

- Is there a workable plan for providing services outside of a traditional school building and across a large geographic area, potentially statewide (perhaps via contracting with specialized providers)?
- How will the school ensure that student outreach and recruitment appropriately address the needs of students with disabilities and do not discourage appropriate enrollment?

Health and Physical Education

- How will the school meet state requirements concerning health services, screenings, and immunizations?
- How will the school meet state standards or requirements for physical education?

Technology

- Is the instructional program easy to use, secure, and private?
- What platform dependencies does the program have?
- What technology, including types of hardware and software, equipment and other materials will the school provide to every student?
- Does the school have a solid plan for technical support and troubleshooting for students, teachers, parents, and administrators?
- Does the school have solid systems for tracking attendance, student academic progress, and state reporting via an integrated student information system (SIS)?
- Does the program have an “early warning system” to alert teachers and administrators about potential problems with individual students and their academic progress (or lack thereof)?

Leadership, Staffing, Teaching, and Professional Development

- Is there a solid plan for organizational design with manageable roles; clear description of staff positions and job duties; and clear lines of authority, decision-making, and accountability?
- What are the qualifications of the school’s leadership and administration, particularly with regard to ensuring student success via online learning?
- Does the school have a thoughtful and realistic plan for recruiting, hiring and retaining quality teachers, meeting teacher qualification requirements under federal laws like NCLB and, if applicable, relevant state certification requirements under the charter law?

- Describe adult roles and how they will differ from traditional teachers’ roles. Detail teacher roles (including uncertified teachers) in areas such as instruction, coaching, advising, monitoring student progress, managing behavior, developing and designing courses, modeling, mentoring/advising, providing technical support, etc. Detail roles of non-teaching staff related to instruction or student support.
- How will the school ensure that all the teachers it hires have the requisite subject-matter knowledge, technological proficiency, communication skills, and other capabilities to teach effectively in the online environment?
- What is the plan for training and providing professional development to prepare and support teachers in the virtual learning environment? How will the school evaluate teachers and the school leadership?
- Is there a well-designed, effective plan for direct teacher interactions with students (specifying reasonable frequency, types of interaction, required turnaround/response times, virtual office hours, etc.)? How much time will individual students spend interacting directly with teachers in a typical week or other given time period?
- How will teachers guide and oversee instruction, assess academic progress, and assist students in their learning?
- What are the planned average class sizes and teacher-student ratio? How will this structure ensure meaningful and sufficient teacher-student interactions to guide and enable each student to meet performance goals and standards?
- Describe a typical day and week for a teacher of the school.

Operations

- How will the school handle the application and enrollment process, including mid-year enrollment and withdrawals and plans for modifying academic expectations (based on enrollment timing)?
- What constitutes “attendance” in the online school—hours logged or lessons completed/mastered, etc.?
- How will the school handle truancy, absences, suspensions, and expulsions?
- What is the plan for providing and handling instructional materials: determination of items (e.g., books, science equipment, art supplies, computer, printer, Internet service provider provision or reimbursement, etc.), integration with online lessons, procurement, distribution, inventory management, reclamation, and recycling?

- Does the school demonstrate requisite capacity for effective vendor management, including education or charter management organizations (EMOs or CMOs), if applicable?
- How will the school conduct community outreach, given that its geographic territory may be larger than that of a conventional school?
- How will the school inform interested students and parents about the instructional model and expectations prior to enrollment, and orient students and parents post-enrollment?
- How – and how frequently – will the school communicate with students and parents?
- If the school will serve a wide territory (e.g., statewide), how will the school be accessible in-person to parents and families across the territory served? Will the school have multiple offices across the state, or will it hold regular meetings around the state?
- What procedures will the school establish to handle, review, and respond to parent complaints or concerns?
- Will student, parent, and teacher satisfaction surveys be used to evaluate progress and make improvements? If so, how?
- How will community partners (e.g., businesses, universities, nonprofits, social service agencies) be integrated meaningfully when the school operates “remotely”?
- What is the school’s backup plan for delivering instruction in the case of technical or other course delivery problems that may arise, preventing normal course delivery?

Finances

- Are plans for technology investments reasonable and sound, with attendant amortization of costs? Does the budget adequately include both hardware and software costs?
- Will the school be able to maintain adequate cash flow?
- How has the school handled forecasting, with corresponding budget and enrollment scenarios? (Online schools may encounter wider variances given their often larger scale. In addition, virtual schools that are not the first online school in the state may have much more difficulty recruiting, thus requiring higher expenses for outreach and recruitment. Budgets should reflect realistic expenses for recruitment, as well as reserves and contingencies for lower-than-expected enrollment.)
- How will the school bill for student funding, and does it reflect a clear understanding of state and local processes?

Performance Record

If the applicant is – or plans to contract with – an organization that has experience operating a virtual charter school (which will typically be the case), the authorizer should examine the operator’s performance record as demonstrated by its existing schools, particularly those serving students similar to the proposed target population. *(See Box)*

Growth Plans & Capacities

If the applicant is – or plans to contract with – an organization that operates multiple schools, the authorizer should understand the operator’s growth plans and capacity to support and maintain quality in the proposed school over the long term. *(See Box)*

i Another resource that can help authorizers develop appropriate questions for virtual charter applicants is the specialized cyber charter application developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/charter_schools/7356/applying_to_become_a_charter_school_in_pa/508181.

ii Useful resources for authorizers seeking more guidance or assistance in overseeing third-party contracts with external providers include Adam Lowe and Margaret Lin, “Steadying the Three-Legged Stool: Authorizers, Charter Schools, and Education Service Providers,” NACSA Issue Brief No. 12, October 2006, http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/publications/Issue_Briefs/IssueBriefNo12_Three-Legged_Stool.pdf; and Margaret Lin and Bryan Hassel, *Charting a Clear Course: A Resource Guide for Building Successful Partnerships between Charter Schools and School Management Organizations*, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, <http://www.publiccharters.org/publication/?id=393>.

iii NACSA *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, p. 20.



NACSA develops quality authorizing environments that lead to a greater number of quality charter schools. Learn more about NACSA at www.qualitycharters.org.

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