

# HOW DO I START A CHARTER SCHOOL?

Starting a charter school is truly a community effort. No one who has ever started a charter school will tell you that the process is easy. However, the rewards you may find by creating a new educational option for children are well worth the effort. This guide is meant to be a road map to guide you along the milestones you will face in realizing your dream to start your own school.

# STAGE 1

## GETTING STARTED

### YOUR VISION

#### “Why do I want to start a charter school?”

As a charter developer, you will need to have a clear answer to this question. It will help guide you every step in the journey to opening a school. People have a wide variety of reasons for starting charter schools. Some want to open schools focused on science or the environment. Some charter schools are dedicated to helping underserved children get to college. Others want to create new learning environments or emphasize parental involvement. A clear mission statement will help you build support for your school.

### RECRUITING A TEAM

#### “Who will help me start a charter school?”

No one can start a charter school alone. Creating a charter school is a complicated process, and you will need to have a strong team with a variety of talents to make your vision a reality. Many charter schools are started by a visionary parent, administrator, teacher or community leader. The California Charter Schools Association can help connect you with other people in your community interested in starting a charter school.

### RESEARCH

#### “How difficult will it be to start a charter school in my community?”

Although there is one uniform charter law for the state of California, you will need to research the charter policies and procedures in your own community. Some school districts have plenty of experience approving charter schools. Others have not dedicated any staff to charter planning or may have never processed an application. Some school districts and county offices of education welcome charter applications, while others may be resistant to charters. You will need to know exactly what type of political and procedural environment you will be facing from day one.

### Building a Strong Founders Group

There are many people interested in starting charter schools just waiting to be recruited into a real project. Many founders groups include parents, teachers, school principals, lawyers, business entrepreneurs and accountants.

Your founders group will need to have expertise in a variety of areas, including:

- curriculum & instruction
- public school financing
- real estate
- human resources
- public relations
- management
- governance
- education law
- drafting charter school applications
- fund raising
- assessment of student achievement

# STAGE 2

## DEVELOPING A SCHOOL

### MAKE A PLAN

#### “What should my school plan include?”

Your team will need to agree on:

A clear mission and vision

An instructional program (including a plan for specialized services such as special education and English learners)

A school budget

What type of board of education structure will govern the school

The administrative structure of the school

Staffing levels

What size and type of facility will be needed. Typically classroom-based charter schools need to have 60 to 140 square feet per student in code compliant facilities

The San Diego Office of Education has an excellent charter development guide posted on its web site. Visit the web site [www.static.kern.org/gems/fcmat/charter2003.pdf](http://www.static.kern.org/gems/fcmat/charter2003.pdf))

### FINANCING

#### “How will I pay for the charter development process?”

Many charter schools use a combination of private and public funds to get through the charter development process. Some charter development teams start with as little as \$10,000. Depending on the circumstances, charter school development – from beginning to end – can cost between \$250,000 and \$2.5 million in loans and/or grants.

#### Development Funding

The California Department of Education administers the U.S. government’s Public Charter School Grant Program. This program provides grants of up to \$450,000 for start up charter schools. For more information, visit the department’s web site at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/charter/grant/>

# STAGE 3

## WRITING THE CHARTER

### PETITION

#### “What do I need to address in my charter petition”

A charter is the contract that the charter development group enters into with the charter-granting agency (usually a local board of education or county office of education). Some charter developers write their own charters while others hire charter development organizations that specialize in charter writing and approval.

### REQUIREMENTS

Under state law there are 16 “required elements” of a charter petition:

1. A description of the educational program of the school, as specified.
2. The measurable pupil outcomes identified for use by the school.
3. The method by which pupil progress in meeting those pupil outcomes is to be measured.
4. The school's governance structure, including parental involvement.
5. The qualifications to be met by individuals employed by the school.
6. Procedures to ensure health and safety of pupils and staff.
7. The means by which the school will achieve racial and ethnic balance among its pupils, reflective of the general population residing in the district.
8. Admission requirements, if applicable.
9. The manner in which annual financial audits will be conducted, and the manner in which audit exceptions and deficiencies will be resolved.
10. The procedures by which pupils may be suspended or expelled.
11. Provisions for employee coverage under the State Teachers' Retirement System, the Public Employees' Retirement System, or federal social security.
12. The public school alternatives for pupils residing within the district who choose not to attend charter schools.
13. A description of the rights of any employee of the school district upon leaving the employment of the school district to work in a charter school, and of any rights of return to the school district after employment at a charter school.
14. A dispute resolution process.
15. A declaration whether or not the charter school will be the exclusive public school employer of the charter school employees.
16. The procedures to be used if the charter school closes.

In addition to these required elements, the law requires you to submit various financial documents such as three-year budget and cash flow projections and a facilities plan.

# STAGE 4

## APPROVAL

### MAKING IT HAPPEN

Getting a charter approved is not as simple as just filling out an application with the board of education and/or getting a public hearing.

#### Charter Developers need to:

Circulate a petition, as specified in law, that documents the support of parents and or teachers for the school

Bring community supporters of the charter to public hearings on the petition and submit letters of support from the community to the authorizing agency.

Secure support from community stakeholders

Circulate application to all parts of the community for their review

If possible, submit a draft application to the authorizing board of education or office of education for preliminary review Note: Some districts will not accept a “draft” and will only review a final charter.

Consider advice that you receive about the petition and revise it accordingly. This step may help strengthen community support.

Get to know people on the staff and the governance board of the authorizing agency

# STAGE 5

## OPENING THE SCHOOL

### FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

Once your charter has been approved by an authorizing agency, you will need to begin preparations to actually open the school.

#### Important steps include:

Creating a plan to complete everything that needs to be accomplished before the school opens. The plan should be clear about exactly what role each member of the development team will play and how the plan will be implemented.

Applying to the State Department of Education for a charter number and school code and completing information necessary to receive state operational funding

File articles of incorporation, if applicable

File for nonprofit status, if applicable

Create a governing board

Decide on system for testing students

Write bylaws and policies

Make clear agreements with the authorizing agency about the scope of their oversight and what additional services, if any it will provide to the charter school and the terms of those services.

Recruit and admit students

Secure a facility for the school

Create a school calendar

Create systems for accounting, staff benefits, payroll, banking, purchasing, transportation, cafeteria services, legal services, technology and insurance

Plan professional development activities

Recruit and hire teachers and staff

Select and buy instructional materials

Secure start up and ongoing operational funding

### Start-Up Funding

The state of California has a charter school revolving loan program. This program provides start up loans of up to \$250,000 for charter schools in their first term of operation. A term of operation can be up to five years. The loans must be repaid within five years after the loan is granted. For more information visit the CDE web site at: [www.cde.ca.gov/charter/funding/revloan2.html](http://www.cde.ca.gov/charter/funding/revloan2.html)

Also, ongoing operational funding is available to charter schools through the charter school block grant funding model. The funding is based on attendance and other information from the charter school.

For more information visit the CDE web site at: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/charter/funding/0203csfundmemo.htm>

Other rich online resources for California charter schools include: <http://www.cacharterschools.org>  
<http://www.casbo.org>  
<http://www.ccsesa.org>  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/charter/>  
<http://www.cetpa-k12.org>  
<http://www.charterassociation.org>  
<http://www.edsource.org>  
<http://www.educationroundtable.org/charterschools/>

# ONE FOUNDER'S JOURNEY

Ting L. Sun, Ph.D.

Ting Sun is one of the founders of Natomas Charter School, a K-12 campus serving 1,100 students in the Sacramento area. She and Charlie Leo, another middle school teacher in the Natomas school district, created the school in 1993. The school started with 80 eighth graders and has now grown to more than a thousand students in four programs.

Sun set out to start a charter school after just five years as a language arts teacher in the district. She was inspired to start a charter school after her own suggestions for improving instruction at her school were not considered.

"I knew I wasn't going to last much longer in teaching if I didn't feel I could be more effective in my classroom," said Sun.

Today the Natomas Charter School family is proud of its commitment to the school's core values: community service, a thematic approach to curriculum, parental involvement, technology and alternative assessments.

"We were able to create an environment that supports teachers and allows teachers to shape curriculum based on student need," Sun said.

Sun is now the Vice President of the leadership & quality group for the California Charter Schools Association and is leading the organization toward its goal of inspiring the creation of 1,000 new charter schools in California over the course of the next 10 years.

"We created this publication with the hope that it will welcome more people to the charter school movement," Sun said. "There are many roles people can play in the development of a charter school. Even if you are not the person writing the petition or running the school, there are many ways to have input in the process of creating and operating a charter school. Charter schools are truly community efforts. I hope this publication inspires you to become involved in supporting a charter school in your community."

## INTERESTED IN STARTING A CHARTER SCHOOL?

The California Charter Schools Association hosts workshops for charter school developers.

For more information, please contact the California Charter Schools Association at 866.415.CCSA or [info@charterassociation.org](mailto:info@charterassociation.org).

You can also visit our web site at [www.charterassociation.org](http://www.charterassociation.org).