



EXPLORING STARTING A CHARTER SCHOOL IN MINNESOTA

In 1991, Minnesota launched a bold experiment to unleash public education from convention, in order to:

- increase pupil learning and student achievement,
- increase learning opportunities for pupils,
- encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods,
- measure learning outcomes and create different and innovative forms of measuring outcomes,
- establish new forms of accountability for schools, and
- create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.

Since Minnesota’s charter school law was enacted, hundreds of “social entrepreneurs”- “school founders” have come forward with ideas for charter schools in Minnesota. Social entrepreneurs (individuals or groups of individuals) are change agents who take direct action to launch, nurture and grow innovative, effective and sustainable approaches to benefit humanity. Social entrepreneurs in education take direct action to transform the educational system and the opportunities that are available to young people – especially those who are underserved, neglected, or disadvantaged. The bottom line is that social entrepreneurs seek to create a new and sustainable equilibrium in the educational enterprise.

The history of success and failure among those charter school entrepreneurs has made it clear that there are things that these “social entrepreneurs” can and need to do in order to have a higher probability of success in creating and sustaining a charter school.

The first thing is to recognize that, in social entrepreneurial activity, there are phases in the process. In terms of charter schools, there are four phases: **exploration; development; start-up; and sustained operation.**

Often, people are so passionate and committed to their idea that they believe they cannot fail; thus, they skip a lot of the critical steps in the process—especially the beginning or exploration phase. The result frequently is that their idea fails because there was never any honest assessment or any groundwork done to build the foundation of the enterprise.

Phase One – Exploration:

The first phase in the process of creating a charter school is to explore your idea for a school by defining the vision, conducting initial market research, forming a school development team, and researching a potential authorizer.

The purpose of the exploration phase is to determine:

- whether the school is feasible,
- whether there is a potential market that meets a need, and
- whether the people involved have the capacity not only to make it happen, but also to be successful.

The goal of the exploration phase is to see if the proposed school fails or succeeds on paper. It is far better for everyone involved in the entire charter school movement that, if a school is going to fail, it fails on drafting paper and not in the newspaper, or before public and private financial resources are committed, people hired, and students enrolled.

Minnesota’s chartered public school movement is harmed when “social entrepreneurs” skip the process required for determining the feasibility of a charter school.

The chartered public school movement cannot afford the attitude of some people — that if you build it, people will come. This may work with a baseball field on a fictional movie set in Iowa. The reality, however, is that creating a charter school is not about playing school — it is serious business. It is about creating a non-profit business to provide young people academic opportunities to achieve their potential in an environment that values innovation and an active partnership between professional educators and parents.

Overview:

Defining Vision, Values, & Mission

Conducting Market Research

Developing School Development Team

Researching & Contacting Authorizer

School Developers often ask how long the Exploration Phase will take. The answer depends on you and the development team you put together, as well as the amount of time the school development team devotes on a weekly basis to doing the exploration phase activities.

Remember that you are exploring the development of starting a small non-profit business that would operate a public institution called a public school, whose purpose is to educate young people in Minnesota.

It is better that you take whatever time you need to do the tasks at hand well. Authorizers expect it, and Minnesota's young people deserve it.

What is the academic year you anticipate wanting to open the charter school if it proves to be feasible?

Year 20__ -- 20__

(Plan that it will take between 12-18 months from concept to charter school opening.)

Conceptual Timeline for your Exploration Phase Activities.

(Establish a date and identify what you think the activities are that you need to complete)

Projected Date for Completion

Defining Vision, Values, & Mission - _____(Date)
Activities:
•
•
•
•

Projected Date for Completion

Conducting Market Research - _____(Date)
Activities:
•
•
•
•

Projected Date for Completion

Developing School Development Team - _____(Date)
Identify:
•
•
•
•
•
•

Projected Date for Completion

Researching & Contacting Authorizer - _____(Date)
Activities:
•
•
•
•
•
•
•

We strongly encourage you to revise your timeline once you read through and think about the amount of time that you can actually commit on a weekly basis to the process and tasks outlined in this guide/workbook.

Exploration Phase Activity: Identifying & Forming the School Development Team

Successful social entrepreneurs recognize that they cannot succeed by acting alone. No one individual possesses the expertise, talents, knowledge, or skills that are required to begin or operate a school or any other social enterprise.

A basic element of the exploration phase is to identify the necessary talent and experience that will be needed to develop a business plan/charter application. In other words, one of the primary tasks of the exploration phase is the formation of the school development team. Having a solid development team is a *requirement* of charter application process, as it is one of the factors in determining whether a school should be authorized.

One of the basic questions that authorizers will be evaluating in their deliberations whether to authorize a school and grant a charter is whether the school developers have the skills and knowledge. One of the challenges in forming a school development team is that founders often have too much in common.

Examples of Founders who might have too much in common (Cornwall 84):

- *Classmates from a university who have shared a common course of study*
- *Coworkers who come from the same department in the business in which they all work*
- *Friends who come together to pursue a common dream*
- *A group of parents wishing to create a school with a different culture or specialized focus*
- *A group of teachers who want to serve a particular population of students*

The challenge of having too much in common is “leadership inbreeding,” or people with a single set of skills, a limited range of ideas, or a myopic approach to making decisions. If the leadership development team shares common experiences and backgrounds, it may lack the diversity of thought for creative problem solving.

In the exploration phase, the formation of a school development team should be a high priority. The team should be composed of non-related individuals—teachers, parents, and community leaders who have a diversity of skills, experiences, and talents.

When composing the school development team (which may eventually become the founding board), it is also important to identify and recruit people who will not be a part of the founding team but are willing to serve as advisors at no cost to the development team.

List the members of the school development team, their role and function during the exploration and development process, and their anticipated role once the school is operational.

NAME

ROLE

List the types of advisors and names of the individuals the school development team anticipates needing in the process of developing the business plan / charter application.

TYPE OF ADVISORS

POTENTIAL ADVISORS

Exploration Phase Activity: Researching Authorizers

The final step of the exploration phase is to begin identifying potential authorizers for the school you envision.

In Minnesota, authorizers may be traditional school districts, colleges or universities, or non-profit organizations.

There are a number of organizations that authorize charter schools in Minnesota. A list of current authorizers can be found in the Authorizer Directory on the MACS website: <http://www.mncharterschools.org>.

Over time, a number of these authorizers have carved out niches in the types of schools, locations and/or number of schools they will authorize. Thus, it is important for school developers to find an authorizer who will be willing to serve as your school's authorizer, who will be a good fit in terms of philosophy and approach, and who has the capacity to serve as an authorizer.

As authorizer organizations take on authorizing voluntarily, it is important that school developers have done the required exploration work before approach authorizers. When a school developer approaches a potential authorizer, the initial exploration work should have been completed and considered thoroughly.

The school developer/development team should be able to:

- articulate the vision and mission of the proposed school,
- present documentation of the initial market research that shows the potential market and need for the school, and
- document the members of the school development team and their skills, experience, and role in the development process.

The purpose of having accomplished the exploration phase activities is to demonstrate to potential authorizer that you are serious and that there is a framework for beginning a relationship.

Research Questions to Pose to Potential Authorizers:

- How long have you been authorizing Charter Schools?
- How many schools do you currently authorize and what is the capacity of the organization to authorize?
- What types of schools do you authorize?
- What is the process for reviewing and approving charter school proposals?
- What are the criteria for reviewing and approving charter school proposals?
- What role do you like to play with school developers as they develop their business plans / applications?
- What is your oversight process during the:
 - Pre-operational year?
 - First year of operation?
 - The year the charter is up for renewal?
- What is the process and criteria you use in the renewal process?
- What is your normal and ongoing oversight of the schools you authorize?

Research Authorizer Organizations and Identify Two or Three Potential Authorizers for the school and List the Reasons you have Chosen those Potential Authorizers.

POTENTIAL AUTHORIZER	REASONS FOR CONSIDERATION

List the types of advisors and names of the individuals the school development team anticipates needing in the process of developing the business plan / charter application.

BENEFITS

CHALLENGE

For more information, please contact:

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