

New Schools for New Orleans  
Governance Training

**An Introduction to  
Charter School Board Service  
Charter Boards 101**

**Tuesday, March 10, 2009  
6:00 – 8:00 pm**

Presenter:  
Marci Cornell-Feist



**NEW SCHOOLS FOR NEW ORLEANS**

## Agenda

- Welcome and context setting
  - Why is charter school board service so important? What's at stake here?
- Introductions
  - Who's in the room?
- Quick overview of charter school boards
  - What does the board do?
  - What's required of individual trustees?
  - Who makes an effective charter school board member?
- Types of charter school boards
  - Various stages of founding to sustainability
  - Which type of board is right for you?
  - What skills, expertise and qualifications are they looking for?
- Tips for screening a charter school board
- Next Steps – how to get involved/continue the process
- Hear the real life experiences of a few current charter school board members



## Effective Charter School Governance in a Nutshell

- Every public charter school is governed by an independent Board of Trustees.
- In many ways the board is the “public” in public charter school.
- As a public board it is essential that board composition and board practice is done in such a way as to garner the public trust.

The essential ingredients of an exceptional charter school board include:

- Getting “**the right people on the bus**” – which is a matter of defining who makes for a strong board member and a clear process to identify, screen and recruit the “right “people.
- Clearly **understanding what they have promised to deliver** to their authorizer and developing clear and consistent ways to measure this.
- **Being prepared to govern for what matters most**
  - The academic success of every student
  - Effective oversight of the financial health of the school
  - Support, guidance and evaluation of the school leader
  - Focusing on results
- Having the **right structures** to make effective oversight possible
- Demonstrating and implementing a **clear understanding of the difference between governance and management.**



## **Top 10 Characteristics of a Highly Effective<sup>®</sup> Charter School Governing Board**

1. Passionate, unwavering belief in the charter school's mission and core values.
2. Clarity of collective vision – where the school is and where it wants to be in the future.
3. A firm understanding of the charter promises and a clear, consistent way to measure them.
4. Clarity of roles and responsibilities
  - a. Role of the full board
  - b. Role of individual board members
  - c. Role of committees
  - d. Role of the School Leader
5. Demonstration of a clear understanding of the difference between governance and management
6. Focused on results
7. The right structure
  - a. Board size
  - b. Composition
  - c. Committee structure
  - d. Officers
8. Board meetings – focused on strategic questions not just reporting
9. A School Leader who assists in the creation of effective governance
10. A strong partnership between the board and the School Leader that is built on mutual trust and respect.



**Governance Defined:**

A Board is an organized group of volunteers who, collectively, are legally and morally accountable to the community for the health, vitality and effectiveness of the organization. As representatives of the public, the Board of Trustees is the primary force pressing the organization to the realization of its opportunities for service and the fulfillment of its obligations to all its constituencies.

The general term used to describe the role of the Board of Trustees is “governance”. The governance function encompasses legal responsibilities, general oversight, planning and policy-making, and fiduciary requirements.

The Board only has authority as a group. By its very nature, a board is a collective and its authority is a group function. No single individual within the board has authority for the board itself.

**Ten Basic Responsibilities of a Nonprofit Board<sup>1</sup>**

1. Determine the organization’s mission and purpose
2. Select the Chief Executive
3. Support the Chief Executive and Assess His or Her Performance
4. Ensure Effective Organizational Planning
5. Ensure Adequate Resources
6. Manage Resources Effectively
7. Determine, Monitor, and Strengthen the Organization’s Programs and Services
8. Enhance the Organization’s Public Standing
9. Ensure Legal and Ethical Integrity and Maintain Accountability
10. Recruit and Orient New Board members and Assess Board Performance

---

<sup>1</sup> Board Source, formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Boards.



## **Expectations of a charter school board member**

### **1. Governor**

Fulfilling governance functions

### **2. Ambassador**

Reaching out to the community

### **3. Sponsor**

Giving time and money

### **4. Consultant**

Using skills and expertise on behalf of the organization



***SAMPLE***

**The ABC Charter School Board of Trustees Job Description**<sup>©</sup>

**General Responsibilities:**

Responsible for ensuring that the academic program of ABC Charter School (ABC) is successful, that the school's program and operation are faithful to the terms of its charter, and that the school is a viable organization.

**Specific Responsibilities:**

1. Determine the mission and purpose of ABC and keep it clearly in focus<sup>2</sup>.
  - Create and periodically review the mission statement which:
    - a. Serves as a guide to organizational planning, board and staff decision-making, volunteer initiatives, and setting priorities among competing demands for scarce resources.
    - b. Is used as the vehicle for assessing program activities to ensure that the organization is not drifting away from its original purposes.
  - Understand and support the mission statement.
2. Select the Executive Director
  - Reach consensus on the Executive Director's job description.
  - Undertake a careful search process to find the most qualified individual.
  - Oversee and approve contract negotiation and renewal.
3. Support and review the performance of the Executive Director
  - Provide frequent and constructive feedback.
  - Assist when board members overstep prerogatives or misunderstand their roles.
  - Compliment for exceptional accomplishments.
  - Provide for an annual written performance review with a process agreed upon with the Executive Director well in advance.
4. Ensure effective organizational planning
  - Approve an annual organizational plan that includes concrete, measurable goals consistent with the charter.

---

<sup>2</sup> Note the 10 titles in this description come from the BoardSource “Top Ten Responsibilities of a Nonprofit Board and have been adapted to the charter school context. Thanks to the Hillview Montessori Charter School of Haverhill Massachusetts for their model.



5. Ensure adequate resources
  - Approve fundraising targets and goals.
  - Assist in carrying out development plan.
  - Make an annual gift at a level that is personally meaningful.
6. Manage resources effectively
  - Approve the annual budget.
  - Monitor budget implementation through periodic financial reports.
  - Approve accounting & personnel policies.
  - Provide for an independent annual audit by a qualified CPA.
  - Ensure adequate insurance is in force to cover students, staff, visitors, the board and the assets of the school.
7. Determine, monitor and strengthen the programs and services
  - Assure programs and services are consistent with the mission and the charter.
  - Approve measurable organizational outcomes
  - Approve annual, attainable board and management level goals.
  - Monitor progress in achieving the outcomes and goals.
  - Assess the quality of the program and services.
8. Enhance ABC's public standing
  - Serve as ambassadors, advocates and community representatives of the school.
  - Ensure that no board member represents her/himself as speaking on behalf of the board unless specifically authorized to do so.
  - Provide for a written annual report and public presentation that details ABC's mission, programs, financial condition, and progress made towards charter promises.
  - Approve goals of an annual public relations program
9. Ensure legal and ethical integrity and maintain accountability
  - Establish polices to guide the school's board members and staff.
  - Develop and maintain adequate personnel policies and procedures (including grievance mechanisms).
  - Adhere to the provisions of the school's bylaws and articles of incorporation.
  - Adhere to local, state and federal laws and regulations that apply to the school.
  - Ensure compliance with all federal state and local government regulations.
10. Recruit and orient new board members and assess board performance
  - Define board membership needs in terms of skill, experience and diversity.
  - Cultivate and check the credentials of and recruit prospective nominees.
  - Provide for new board member orientation.
  - Conduct an annual evaluation of the full board and individual trustees.



***SAMPLE***  
**ABC Charter School Individual Trustee Performance Expectations®**

**General Responsibilities:**

Each trustee is responsible for actively participating in the work of the ABC Board of Trustees and the life of the school. Each trustee is expected to affirm and strive to fulfill the performance expectations outlined below. These expectations are to be clearly articulated prior to nominating any candidate as a Board member. The ABC Board will nominate the candidate only after s/he has agreed to fulfill these expectations. In addition to the responsibilities below, individual trustees are expected to help each other fulfill the tasks outlined in the collective Job Description of the Board of Trustees.

**Specific Responsibilities:**

1. Believe in and be an active advocate ambassador for the values, mission, and vision of ABC.
2. Work with fellow board members to fulfill the obligations of Board membership.
3. Behave in ways that clearly contribute to the effective operation of the Board of Trustees:
  - Focus on the good of the organization and group, not on personal agenda
  - Support Board decisions once they are made
  - Participate in an honest appraisal of one's own performance and that of the Board
  - Build awareness of and vigilance toward governance matters rather than management.
4. Regularly attend Board and committee meetings in accordance with absenteeism policy. Prepare for these meetings by reviewing materials and bringing the materials to meetings. If unable to attend, notify the Board or committee Chair.
5. Keep informed about the school and its issues by reviewing materials, participating in discussions, and asking strategic questions.
6. Actively participate in one or more fundraising event(s) annually.
7. Use personal and professional contacts and expertise for the benefit of the ABC.
8. Serve as a committee or task force chair or member.
9. Give an annual financial contribution and support capital campaigns at a level that is personally meaningful.
10. Inform the Board of Trustees of ABC of any potential conflicts of interest, whether real or perceived, and abide by the decision of the Board related to the situation.



**BOARD MEMBER AGREEMENT <sup>3</sup>**  
**Hill View Montessori Charter School Board of Trustees**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ understand that as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Hill View Montessori Charter School I have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that the organization does the best work possible in pursuit of its goals. I believe in the purpose and the mission of the organization, and I will act responsibly and prudently as its steward.

I have read and understand the Trustee Job Description and the Board of Trustees Job Description that govern my work on the Board. I will perform my duty as a board member by fulfilling my responsibilities as an individual Trustee as specified in the Trustee Job Description and by partnering with other trustees to fulfill the responsibilities of the collective Board as specified in the Board of Trustees job description.

If I don't fulfill these commitments to the organization, I will expect the board Chair to call me and discuss my responsibilities with me. After discussion, if I still feel unable to fulfill these expectations I will resign from the Board.

In turn, the organization will be responsible to me in several ways:

1. I will be sent, without request, quarterly financial reports and an update of organizational activities that allow me to meet the "prudent person" section of the law.
2. The organization will help me perform my duties by keeping me informed about issues in the industry and field in which we are working, and by offering me opportunities for professional development as a board member.
3. Board members and the Executive Director will respond in a straightforward fashion to questions I have that are necessary to carry out my Board and Committee-related responsibilities to this organization.
4. Board members and the Executive Director will work in good faith with me towards achievement of our goals.
5. If the organization does not fulfill its commitments to me, I can call on the board Chair and Executive Director to discuss these responsibilities.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Member, Board of Directors

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chair, Board of Directors

\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Executive Director

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from *Board Cafe*, Vol. 5, No. 3, March 28, 2001



## **Charter School Board Composition**

- **What is the ideal size of a charter school board?**
- **What are the most important skills?**
  - Finance
  - Facility—acquisition, build out, financing
  - Fundraising
  - Legal
  - Personnel/Human Resources
  - Education—but not too narrow, ideally someone who has run a school before
  
  - Previous governance experience
- **Qualities**
  - Entrepreneurial
  - Sense of humor
  - Passion for the mission
  - TIME
  - Group process
- **Diversity – in the broadest sense of the term**
  - Ethnicity
  - Gender
  - Age
  - Geography
  - Etc.
- **Appropriate role of key stakeholders in governance**
  - Parents
  - Teachers
  - Students



## Tips for Screening a Charter School Board

Thank you for your interest in possibly serving on a charter school board. Charter school board service is a weighty, yet extremely rewarding, experience.

We have compiled some information to help you find the best board for your unique interests and skills. Each charter school is different; you should be prepared to put in a bit of legwork to find just the right fit.

### **What is the time commitment for serving on a charter school board?**

This varies from school to school although best practice tells us that the most effective charter school board members give 6-10 hours a month. This generally breaks down as:

- 2 hours per month for board meetings
- 1-2 hours per month for committee meetings
- 1-2 hours for committee work in between meetings
- 2-4 hours per month for ambassador and fundraising tasks

At a bare minimum you will need to be able to commit to monthly board meetings and at least 2 hours of work in between board meetings. Schools in the start-up, pre-opening phase may require slightly more time. Be sure to ask the board that is recruiting you for an honest assessment of how much time they need you to give per month.

### **I don't have a background in education; can I be an effective board member of a charter school?**

Absolutely! Although an effective charter school board should have some educators on the board (people who really know accountability, have run schools or educational institutions before), the majority of board members should have the skills that the staff of the charter school will never have.

### **What skills are charter schools looking for when they seek board members?**

The priority areas are:

- Financial—both accounting and bigger picture financial management skills
- Real estate—facility identification, negotiation, financing and property management
- Fundraising—especially cultivating individual donors, building a donor base
- Public relations/marketing—especially as it relates to fundraising and community building
- Human resources—personnel policies, salaries, benefits
- Legal expertise—general law as opposed to educational law
- Education—especially accountability, systems, and big-picture administration of educational institutions
- Previous governance experience (non profit or corporate) and strong connections to the community where the school will be located are a plus

**What characteristics do ideal charter school board members possess?**

- Passionate about the mission
- Time to commit to this important endeavor
- Ability to bring a concrete skill to the board
- Willingness/ability to serve as a governor, ambassador, sponsor and consultant
- Ability to understand the distinctions between governance and management
- Entrepreneurial spirit, comfortable with the excitement and uncertainties of starting a brand new entity from scratch
- Level of objectivity—not close personal friends of other board members or the school leader; lack of personal agenda
- Ability to ask tough questions

**How will I know which board is right for me?**

1. Have an initial meeting with the chair of the board or nominating committee and the school leader
2. Learn what they are looking for in new board members and ask tough questions.
3. If it seems like a fit, set up a visit to the school to meet additional board members, and the school leader if they were unable to attend the first meeting.
4. Attend a board meeting to see the board in action.
5. Clarify what specifically the board will be looking for you to do.
6. Do some soul searching and make sure you can really give the time and that is needed.
7. Consider serving on a board committee to start to get to know the group better and to fully understand the commitment.



## Questions to ask along the way

Feel free to ask lots of questions about the school and the board. The more information you have the better you will be able to assess whether a particular board is right for you.

If the board is doing a good job they will be “interviewing” you—but feel free to “interview” back. Much of this is about finding the right fit.

### Organizational:

- When and how was the school founded?
- What are the school’s biggest strengths to date?
- What are the school’s biggest challenges and how do they plan to address them?
- How does the board know if the school is successful? How is this measured?

### Philosophical Alignment:

- What is your vision of a successful school?
- What is the core philosophy driving this school?

### Skills and Expertise:

- What are the priority skills that you are looking for?
- How will I help fill those gaps?
- How do you plan to fill the other gaps?

### Board:

- How would you describe the board’s culture?
- What are the board’s greatest strengths? Greatest weaknesses?
- What is the current board size? What will it be like in 2 years? 5 years?
- In the ideal situation what would the board be like in 5 years?
- Is there a written job description for the board?
- What are the most important accomplishments of your board to date?
- What does it take to be a successful member of this board?
- What are three adjectives you would use to describe this board?
- If you could change one thing about the board what would it be?
- What are the most important things that the board will focus on in the next year?
- What is the nominating process? What are the steps I would have to go through to be considered for your board?

### Time:

- What is the time commitment required for serving on this board?



**Information you could request:**

- A copy of the school's charter or a summary of the key components
- A job description for the board and individual performance expectations for trustees (if they have it)
- Bios of the current board members
- Minutes from previous board meetings to get a sense of what the board has been focusing on

