

## **Ready-to-Open Framework for North Carolina Public Charter Schools**

The North Carolina Office of Charter Schools (OCS) is dedicated to collaborating with initial boards of approved charter schools to ensure the smooth opening of the high-quality, successful charter schools envisioned during the application process. The planning period is a critical time when the school is laying the foundation for future performance. The planning year culminates in a final Ready-to-Open (RTO) progress report to the Charter School Advisory Board (CSAB) 8-10 weeks prior to the start of the school's first operational year.

The RTO progress report will allow the board to demonstrate the critical work that has been completed in preparation for the opening of the school. In addition, this finalized report can function as the operational framework in which the lead administrator develops the plans and procedures for the school and a marketing tool to demonstrate the school's readiness with prospective parents and the community. In the event that the school is unable to meet the RTO standards that are part of the authorizer's oversight and evaluation process, or requirements stipulated in the charter agreement, the opening of the school could be postponed by one year or, if the circumstances are serious enough, the charter could be revoked under **§ 115C-218.95**.

### **Ready to Open Process**

Prior to the RTO progress report, applicant groups approved by the State Board of Education are provided a detailed checklist designed to walk new schools through the multiple stages of developing their instructional program, reaching out to potential students, securing facilities, creating appropriate financial management and governance policies, and ensuring compliance with the law. Progress in completing checklist activities will be monitored by OCS staff through meetings held with school founders/leadership on a monthly basis. The checklist contains the RTO requirements, as well as, numerous other organization responsibilities that require completion during the pre-operational period. Highlighted items are due as part of the RTO Progress Report Part I. Non-highlighted items are due as part of the RTO Progress Report Part II.

**Ready to Open Checklist** (09/22/15 – may have additional requirements as planning year moves forward)

1. **Enrollment** is sufficient to allow for financial viability and programmatic integrity.
  - a. Confirmed enrollment is at or above the minimum number acceptable per the school's contingency budget for lowest possible operating enrollment. **Note:** Any enrollment figures less than 75% of the projected year one ADM is cause for concern.
  - b. If the enrollment is significantly below projections, the charter school must revise its budget accordingly and provide a copy to the Department of Public Instruction.
  - c. The school should also have a chart on site listing EC students divided by placement (regular, resource, separate).
2. **Required Documentation** on file:
  - a. Certificate of Liability Insurance (see *G.S. 115C-218.20(a)*)
  - b. Signed and notarized charter agreement
3. **Governing Board** is competent and compliant with law.
  - a. Evidence of regular board meetings and minutes indicating the understanding of key laws (e.g., Open Meetings Law) and use of best practices.

- b. Mandated preliminary planning training has been completed including assigned governance strengthening exercises (a minimum of 5 governance strengthening exercises are expected to be included in the RTO progress report).
  - c. Board policies (including grievance and criminal background checks) and bylaws have been **formally approved** by the local board and OCS has a new clean electronic copy of the documents. Include EC policies to ensure students are appropriately served (i.e., discipline, confidentiality, and accountability).
  - d. Evaluation tools regarding the school's executive and governing entities. If the school plans to receive Title I and/or Title II funds, it must use the NC Educator Evaluation System for its teachers and school leader. It may decide upon a tool of its choice to use to evaluate the school's board of directors.
  - e. Current board member list and contact information
- 4. **Facility** has been acquired and the contract signed.
  - a. Renovation or construction is on target for completion: at minimum two weeks before proposed day one of school.
  - b. Facility is safe and suitable to receive students according to local inspection office as demonstrated by a Certificate of Occupancy for Education Purposes being on file in the Office of Charter Schools.
  - c. Contingency plan is in place and ready to be executed in case building is not ready to occupy by the first day of school.
  - d. Lease shall contain language regarding 115C-218.105(b).
- 5. **Funding** is prepared to flow from the State to the school.
 

**Planning Note:** items listed below with a (\*) must be completed before the school will be considered eligible to operate. Details regarding the following list can be found in Section C-1 of the Charter School Finance Guide found here: [Finance Guide for Charter Schools](#).

  - a. Establish accounting services – Prepare for approved accounting software (ISIS).
  - b. Valid Education Certificate of Occupancy (CO) on file in OCS for **ALL** buildings\*
    - i. Any awarded temporary CO must account for at least the first business month of the academic year.
  - c. Establish a bank account.\*
  - d. Complete Projected Enrollment input process from the School Allotments Section (Due in June)\*
  - e. Apply for a DUNS Number, and register on System Award Management (SAM)
  - f. Establish access to Computer Systems (after CO is approved)  
<http://charter.dpi.state.nc.us/>
  - g. Develop and approve amended budget (Based on student enrollment numbers) and prepare to send to the Charter School Finance section mid-July.
  - h. Complete school data in EDDIE <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/eddie/>
  - i. Process initiated for obtaining Federal Tax Exempt Status (due no later than 24 months following final approval).
  - j. Formally vote and prepare letter to notify State Retirement Plan and Comprehensive Major Medical Plan representatives regarding the board's intent to participate (no later than 30 days after charter agreement is signed by both parties)
  - k. Identify LGC approved CPA firm to perform annual audit (annually due by October 31<sup>st</sup>)
  - l. Finance policies adopted and formally approved**
  - m. According to § 115C-218.100(a), "A charter school that has elected to participate in the North Carolina Retirement System pursuant to G.S. 135-5.3 shall, for as long as the charter school continues to participate in the North Carolina Retirement System, maintain

for the purposes of ensuring payment of expenses related to closure proceedings in the event of a voluntary or involuntary dissolution of the charter school, one or more of the options set forth in this subsection. The minimum aggregate value of the options chosen by the charter school shall be fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000). The State Board of Education shall not allocate any funds under G.S. 115C-218.105 to a charter school unless the school has provided documentation to the State Board that the charter school has met the requirements of this subsection. Permissible options to satisfy the requirements of this subsection include one or more of the following:

1. An escrow account
2. A letter of credit
3. A bond
4. A deed of trust.

6. **Student Accountability Plans** are approved and prepared to be carried out by assigned staff.

- a. Testing/accountability coordinator job description developed.
- b. Develop draft of testing calendar
- c. Policies in place regarding student enrollment (10/20 day rule) in End of Course (EOC) courses.
- d. School has a policy and proposed location regarding the mandatory locking up of ALL testing materials.
- e. Fax machine or other communication portals operational to receive important communications from LEAs or DPI divisions.
- f. School has a policy and proposed location regarding the security and confidentiality of EC Student Special Education files.
- g. Records have been requested from each sending LEA as evidenced by documentation at the charter school site.
- h. Identify and develop a plan for implementing EC and/or 504 testing accommodations.

7. **Key staff**

- a. Employee and hiring policies are developed and adopted.
- b. Employee handbook is drafted.
- c. Official employee agreement is formally approved by the board.
- d. The school leader and at least 75% of staff members have been identified for hire. The school is on track to meet the minimum requirement of 50% of its teachers being fully licensed on day one of the school year.
- e. The school has recruited and hired a highly-qualified and licensed special education teacher(s) and/or director. A source has been identified for related service providers (e.g., school psychologist, OT, PT, SLP, audiology, etc.).
- f. A strategic plan is in place to hire any remaining staff before the start of the school year.
- g. Beginning Teacher Support Plan (if applicable) and Licensure Renewal Plan are drafted and submitted to the Licensure Division and the Regional Consultant.

8. **Federal Programming (i.e., Exceptional Children, Title I, ESL)** policies have been developed and formally approved and ready to be carried out.

- a. Board approved policies and contingency plans are in place regarding day one of instruction and meeting the needs of all children present (i.e., *Homebound, Separate Setting, Related Services*).
- b. Attend training for Exceptional Children special funding streams (i.e., behavioral support, special state reserve). Documentation with a description of sources has been obtained.  
<http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/finance-grants>

- c. Contact DPI Regional Consultants for additional supports and trainings. A PD calendar has been outlined for the full school year (regional meetings/training, site-based training). <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/directory/regional-consultants>
  - d. The SBE approved professional development plan is outlined, is scheduled to occur prior to the first day of school, and includes topics to address the needs of Exceptional Children. This PD plan is for the full staff.
  - e. Develop a plan to offer the full continuum of services to meet the special education and related services needs of students with disabilities.
  - f. A professional development plan has been developed to address the staffing needs for those working with students with disabilities (coaching, accommodations, instructional practices, case management). This PD plan is for EC staff only.
9. **Instructional program** components are in place for meeting the mission of the school.
- a. The curriculum scope and sequence for ALL grades to be served in the school's first year are completed.
  - b. The board formally adopts a school calendar representing the academic year that meets the requirements specified in charter school law.
  - c. All necessary materials (e.g., books, programs, technology, etc.) have been identified and will be on-site prior to opening, including the appropriate instructional supports for students with disabilities (as identified in the IEP). Submit a list of all items and the vendors used to purchase them.
10. **Transportation** plan is in place and aligns with the SBE approved plan.
- a. Reach out to local authorities regarding traffic support (i.e., installation of a turning lane to facilitate traffic flow in and out of the school).
  - b. The board has a plan to disseminate the transportation plan (i.e., car pool, van transportation, partnerships, busing, etc.) and traffic patterns to all stakeholders.
  - c. The school has secured buses either through the resident district or an alternative vendor (if applicable).
    - 1. Buses shall be inspected in a timely manner to ensure deficiencies can be fixed prior to the opening of the school.
    - 2. Contact [Transportation Division](#) at DPI to seek feedback regarding the plan and purchased buses.
11. **Lunch** service policies are adopted and align with the SBE approved plan.
- a. If participating in the [Free and Reduced Lunch Program](#), contact **the school nutrition consultant** at 919-807-3506 and ensure all steps are followed with fidelity (**begin in January 2016**).
  - b. Investigate a lunch software program to track program expenditures and applications.
  - c. If **not** participating in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program, ensure there is a plan in place for students who may not be able to afford a lunch.
  - d. Ensure any contracted vendors meet local codes (Local Health Department).
12. **School Safety** policies are adopted and meet the requirements under § 115C-218.75(a).
- a. For resources and support, reach out to the [Center for Safer Schools, NC](#).
  - b. Investigate any local requirements regarding afterschool care/extended school day.
  - c. Ensure ALL local inspections have been completed (fire, health, etc.).
13. **Policy Manuals** have been developed and formally adopted. (\*Please note this is a suggested starting point for your policies. The board will need to continue to develop, adopt, and evaluate

its manuals annually). Policy manuals should be made accessible to parents. Local policies for EC should incorporate all required elements to meet Federal and State regulations (e.g., discipline, confidentiality, accountability, maintenance of effort, etc.).

**i. Instructional Programming**

1. Calendar and length of school day
2. Classroom policies (e.g., grading scales, report cards)
3. Promotion and Retention
4. Accountability
5. Student Behavior
6. Exceptional Children Discipline
7. Exceptional Children Confidentiality
8. Exceptional Children Accountability
9. Exceptional Children Maintenance of Effort

**ii. Operations**

1. Hiring and Termination
2. Criminal Background (staff and volunteers)
3. Staff Evaluation
4. Student Health and Safety
5. Admissions and Enrollment
6. Student Records (including EC records when applicable)
7. After-school programs (if applicable)
8. Family and School Communication
9. Campus Visitors

**iii. Governance**

1. Board Operational Policies
2. Committees
3. Conflict of Interest
4. Nepotism
5. Third-party Agreements (including parent organizations)
6. Grievance (staff and families)
7. Employee Agreements

**iv. Finances**

1. Budget Approval
2. Third-party Contracts
3. Access to Funding
4. Audits
5. Purchasing
6. Federal Funds

**14. Handbooks (Drafts or Final)**

- a. Student/Parent Handbook (including academic calendar)
- b. Employee Handbook
- c. *NC Policies Governing Services for Students with Disabilities* (on-hand at the school and readily available to staff)
- d. *Procedural Safeguards: Handbook on Parents' Rights* (on-hand at the school and readily available to staff and parents)

## **Charter School Initial Board Guidelines and Expectations**

### **Complete Ready to Open Progress Report**

The Ready to Open Progress Report – Part 1(RTOPR1) will be due **November 30, 2015**.

The Ready to Open Progress Report – Part 2 (RTOPR2) will be due **May 27, 2016**.

Both parts of the progress report will include:

- Evidences of progress/completion regarding the criteria noted in the checklist.
- Finalized and board approved policy manuals and handbook drafts

The report shall be disseminated through electronic portfolio. It is recommended that the board utilize the school's web site as a format to display these critical components of the school's operations.

### **Evaluation**

Using the evaluation rubric (see page 7), the RTOPR1 and RTOPR2 will be evaluated by OCS staff and may be reported to the SBE. *Failure to meet minimum RTO emerging criteria for all categories may result in a Ready to Open Meeting with the Charter School Advisory Board (CSAB).*

### **Ready to Open Meeting**

**Location and format:** The RTO meeting will be held face-to-face at a CSAB meeting. Board members of schools that have not made sufficient progress on the RTOPR2 will be required to appear before the CSAB to address the major concerns noted in the RTOPR2 evaluation rubric. Board members should be ready to answer any questions that the CSAB may ask regarding the schools' RTO status.

**Final Decision:** Based on the recommendation of the evaluation team, OCS will inform the school of next steps. Schools that have not satisfied all criteria after submission of the RTO progress report (either part 1 or part 2) may be reported to the State Board of Education. The State Board may delay the opening. In addition, OCS reserves the right to recommend termination of the charter to the State Board of Education if it is clear that significant deficiencies exist which lead OCS to question the viability and integrity of the program. Those deficiencies will be outlined in the correspondence to the governing board.

Criteria	Insufficient	Emerging	Quality	Evaluation Notes
Student Enrollment				
Required Documentation				
Board Governance				
School Facility				
Funding Documentation				
Student Accountability				
Key Staff				
Federal Programming				
Learning Program				
Transportation Plan				
Lunch Program				
School Safety				
Exceptional Children				
Policy Manual				
Handbooks				

A score of **Quality** consists of evidences that reflect a thorough understanding of effective school instructional, governance, operational, and financial planning to produce a viable and quality public charter school. The evidences address each area with specific and detailed information that demonstrates the board's and school leadership's diligence and preparation.

- All required evidences are completed and submitted on time.
- School policy manuals and handbooks are formally adopted and align with ALL sections of the SBE approved charter application.
- The school will be ready to open two weeks prior to the opening day of their projected calendar.

A score of **Emerging** consists of evidences of each criteria being addressed; however, the evidences lack meaningful detail and still require important additional information prior to the public charter school's opening.

- Most required evidences are completed and submitted on time.
- School policy manuals are close to completion and align with ALL sections of the SBE approved charter application.
- The school is projected to meet the opening day of their projected calendar.

A score of **Insufficient** consists of the evidences lacking meaningful detail; demonstrates lack of preparation; unanticipated obstacles, or otherwise raises substantial concerns about the applicant's understanding of the school governance, operational, and financial planning.