

Ready-to-Open Framework for North Carolina Charter Schools

Consistent with G.S. 115C-218.5 and State Board of Education (SBE) Policy CHTR-013, the SBE grants initial approval to applicants for charters “contingent upon the completion of a planning year program.” This means that each nonprofit board approved for a charter must participate in a SBE-adopted yearlong planning program, known as “Ready to Open” (RTO) prior to opening the charter school to serve students.

Each initially-approved charter school works with the Office of Charter Schools (OCS) to submit a final RTO progress report to the Charter School Advisory Board (CSAB) ten to twelve weeks prior to the start of the school’s first operational year. The CSAB uses this report as the basis for determining whether to recommend that the SBE approve the school to open as planned.

The RTO Progress Report provides a framework to help an initially-approved charter school’s lead administrator and board develop required plans and procedures for the school. The framework also serves as a marketing tool that the school can use to demonstrate its readiness to prospective students, parents, and the community. If a school is unable to meet the RTO standards 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.

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 RTO progress report will allow the board to demonstrate the critical work that has been completed in preparation for the opening of the school.

Ready to Open Process

Prior to the RTO progress report, applicant groups approved by the SBE are provided a detailed checklist designed to assist them 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. 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 (07/16/19 – 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 Office of Charter Schools.
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 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. Note that some exercises require multiple products).
 - c. The board formally adopts a school calendar representing the academic year that meets the requirements specified in charter school law.
 - d. Bylaws have been **formally approved** by the local board and OCS has a new clean electronic copy of the document.
 - e. Evaluation tools for the school's executive and governing entities.
 - f. Current board member list and contact information
- 4. **Facility** has been acquired and the contract has been 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. If the Certificate of Occupancy is not issued in the same year that the school opens, then the board must also provide a copy of the current year's fire inspection.
 - c. Contingency plan is in place and ready to be executed in case the building is not ready to occupy by the first day of school for ANY REASON...Regardless of the status of the facility, ALL schools are required to provide a valid contingency plan.
 - d. Lease shall contain the required language from G.S. 115C-218.105(b).
 - e. Ensure ALL local inspections have been completed (fire, health, etc.).
- 5. **Funding** is prepared to flow from the State to the school.

Planning Note: Items listed below with an asterisk (*) 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 – e.g., LINQ.
 - 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. To prepare for the projected enrollment input process from the School Allotments Section, complete a chart showing how many of your enrolled students are from each LEA. Each school will be required to use the Charter School Average Daily Membership Projection System in early June 2020. *
 - e. Apply for a DUNS Number and register on System for Award Management (SAM).
 - f. Develop and approve a regular budget for the 2020-21 school year (Based on projected student enrollment numbers)
 - g. Develop and approve a break-even budget for the 2020-21 school year. This budget should reflect the minimum number of students the school can enroll and still remain financially viable.

- h. Complete school data in EDDIE: <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/fbs/accounting/eddie/>
This includes the following: board chair, board vice chair, school physical address, school mailing address, and school contact information.
 - i. Process initiated for obtaining Federal Tax-Exempt Status (due no later than 24 months following final approval).
 - j. Formally vote to join or opt out of the State Health Plan. (If the board votes to join, it must give notice to the State Health Plan no later than 2 years after the charter agreement is signed by the school's board chair and the State Superintendent. Notify the State Health Plan of the intent to join 6-months in advance at hbrinquires@nctreasurer.com.)
 - k. Formally vote to join or opt out of the State Retirement System. If your board votes to join the System, notify the NC Department of State Treasurer (Retirement Systems Division) and follow the instructions in letter "l" below.
 - l. 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."
 - m. Identify LGC-approved CPA firm to perform annual audit (annually due by October 31st)
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 in End-of-Course (EOC) classes (10/20-Day Rule), if applicable.
 - d. School has a policy and proposed location regarding the mandatory locking up of ALL testing materials.
 - e. Fax machine and other communication portals operational to receive important communications from LEAs and DPI divisions.
 - f. A document template (chart, spreadsheet, etc.) has been created to record the school's requests for student records from each sending LEA.
7. **Key staff**
- a. Official employee agreement is formally approved by the board.
 - b. 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 by December 31st of the opening year.
 - c. A strategic plan is in place to hire any remaining staff before the start of the school year.
 - d. A Professional Development calendar has been outlined for the full school year (regional meetings/training, site-based training, etc.).

- e. Beginning Teacher Support Program Plan has been approved by the Regional Education Facilitator: <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/educatoreffectiveness/regional/>
 - f. Licensure Renewal Plan is drafted and submitted to the Licensure Division.
8. **Exceptional Children** policies have been developed, formally approved, and are ready to be implemented.
- a. The school should have a chart on-site listing EC students divided by placement (regular, resource, separate) and the date each student's record is received.
 - b. The school has a policy and proposed location regarding the security and confidentiality of EC Student Special Education files.
 - c. Identify and develop a plan for implementing EC and 504 testing accommodations.
 - d. 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, occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech language pathologist, audiologist, etc.).
 - e. 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*).
 - f. 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>
 - g. Contact EC Regional Consultants for additional supports and trainings: <http://ec.ncpublicschools.gov/directory/regional-consultants>
 - h. The Professional Development Plan/Calendar 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.
 - i. Develop a plan to offer the full continuum of services to meet the special education and related services needs of students with disabilities.
 - j. A Professional Development Plan/Calendar 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.
 - k. Arrangements have been made to provide transportation as a related service for EC students who may have this as a component of their IEP.
 - l. All appropriate instructional supports for students with disabilities (as indicated in the IEP) have been identified and will be on-site prior to opening. Submit a materials list indicating which items have been ordered and which items remain to be ordered.
 - m. Local policies for EC should incorporate all required elements to meet Federal and State regulations (e.g., discipline, confidentiality, accountability, maintenance of effort, child find, etc.).
 - n. Indicate the budget line items specifically for the EC program. Show how these items fit in the overall budget.
 - o. [*NC Policies Governing Services for Students with Disabilities*](#) (on-hand at the school and readily available to staff)
 - p. [*Procedural Safeguards: Handbook on Parents' Rights*](#) (on-hand at the school and readily available to staff and parents)
 - q. Create a plan describing how the school will provide support structures for struggling students who are NOT in the Exceptional Children's Program (reference [*The MTSS Implementation Guide*](#)). The plan components are listed below:
 - i. Indicate how instruction will be monitored to determine effectiveness.
 - ii. Provide a description of the school team(s) and its function to organize the system of support for students.

- iii. Provide an outline of supports that will be in place for students who need additional assistance and a description of how this will be provided with equitable access.
 - iv. Indicate how staff will be trained and coached in the selected instructional strategies and curriculum materials used for students who are in need of this additional assistance.
 - v. Indicate how students will be identified as needing extra support.
 - vi. Indicate how individual progress for each of these students will be determined.
- 9. **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 transportation plan (i.e., carpool, van transportation, partnerships, busing, walkers, etc.) and a means to communicate the plan 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 the [Transportation Division](#) at DPI to seek feedback regarding the plan and purchased buses.
- 10. **Lunch** service policies are adopted and align with the SBE-approved plan.
 - a. If participating in the [National School Lunch Program](#), contact **the school nutrition consultant** at 919-807-3506 and ensure all steps are followed with fidelity (**begin in January 2020**).
 - b. If **not** participating in the National School Lunch Program, ensure there is a plan in place for students who may not be able to afford a lunch.
 - c. Ensure any contracted vendors meet local codes (Local Health Department).
- 11. **School Safety** policies are adopted and meet the requirements under § 115C-218.75(a).
- 12. **Policies** have been developed and formally adopted. (Please note this is a 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.

i. Instructional Programming

- 1. Structure of School Calendar
- 2. Structure/Length of School Day
- 3. Grading Scales
- 4. Report Cards
- 5. Student Promotion
- 6. Student Retention

ii. Operations

- 1. Criminal Background Checks for Staff
- 2. Criminal Background Checks for Volunteers
- 3. Staff Evaluation
- 4. Admissions
- 5. Lottery (In addition to the Lottery policy, please also submit the Lottery Application.)
- 6. Records Retention
- 7. Student Records

8. Family and School Communication
9. Campus Visitors

iii. Governance

1. Board Committees
2. Conflict of Interest (complies with G.S. 115C-218.15)
3. Nepotism (complies with G.S. 115C-218.15)
4. Board Relationship with Organizations Formed for the School (PTA, PTO, Booster Club, Foundation, etc.)
5. Grievance for Staff Members
6. Grievance for Families
7. Employee Agreements
8. Board Member Residency
9. Board Meeting Calendar

iv. Finances

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

13. Handbooks (Final)

- a. Student/Parent Handbook (including student behavior policies)
- b. Employee handbook has been adopted by the board. It includes policies related to hiring and firing of staff.

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 **December 2, 2019**.

The Ready to Open Progress Report – Part 2 (RTOPR2) will be due **May 22, 2020**.

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 handbooks

The report shall be submitted using Epicenter.

Evaluation

Using the evaluation rubric (see page 8), the RTOPR1 and RTOPR2 will be evaluated by OCS and EC 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 during 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 their school's 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				
Exceptional Children				
Transportation Plan				
Lunch Program				
School Safety				
Policies				
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 its 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 its projected calendar.

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