



2023-2024 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.”

*Note: Being approved as an applicant does not automatically translate into being approved to open. Schools will not receive final approval to open until the NC CSRB votes in June preceding the fall in which it will open.

Rationale

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 the school's approval to open to the SBE.

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, the school will not be authorized to open. In some cases, a charter may be revoked. § 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 through RTO1 and RTO2, in December & May, respectively. The checklist contains the RTO requirements, as well as numerous other organization responsibilities that require completion during the pre-operational period.

- RTO 1 items are due in Epicenter as part of the RTO Progress Report Part I, due **November 27, 2023**
- RTO 2 items are due in Epicenter as part of the RTO Progress Report Part II, due **February 26, 2024**
- RTO 3 items are due in Epicenter as part of the RTO Progress Report Part III, due **May 20, 2024**

Ready to Open Checklist

1. **Enrollment** is sufficient to allow for financial viability and programmatic integrity. Confirmed enrollment is at or above the minimum number acceptable per the school's contingency budget for lowest possible operating enrollment. 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. The statutory minimum number is 80 students. **Note: Any enrollment figures less than 75% of the projected year one ADM is cause for concern and possible recommendation not to continue in the RTO process.**
2. **Required Documentation** on file:
 - (a.) Certificate of Liability Insurance (see G.S. 115C-218.20(a)) with the appropriate lines and coverages, and effective dates in place. Please check your Charter Agreement to see which coverage lines and amounts are required. The NC SBE must be a named additional insured on the Certificate.
 - (b.) Original, signed and notarized charter agreement after the BOD Chair and Superintendent of Public Instruction sign in July.
3. **Governing Board** is competent and compliant with state and federal 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. (August - November for RTO1, December - February for RTO 2, March-May for RTO3)
 - (b.) Mandated planning training has been completed including assigned governance strengthening exercises.
 - (c.) The board formally adopts a school calendar representing the academic year that meets the requirements specified in charter school law. The calendar will make clear that the school is opting for 185 days or 1,025 hours and provide the calculations for said calendar.
 - (d.) Bylaws have been formally approved by the local board and OCS has a new clean electronic copy of the document. Bylaws contain conflict of interest policy and the required no indebtedness language required by law and your Charter Agreement.
 - (e.) Evaluation tools for the school's leader (Principal/Director) and Board of Directors are in place and a letter of assurance or the evaluation tool from the BOD has been provided.
 - (f.) Current board member list and contact information. BOD member criminal background checks should be submitted each time a new BOD member comes on board. (Submit up to date lists for both RTO1 +
4. **Facility** has been acquired and the contract/lease has been signed by both parties.
 - (a.) Renovation or construction is on target for completion: at a 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 Educational 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. Contingency plans involving an alternate location must provide an ECO for that location as well.
 - (d.) Lease shall contain the required 'no indebtedness' language from G.S. 115C-218.105(b).
 - (e.) Ensure ALL local inspections have been completed (fire, health, etc.). Irrespective of whether you will be serving, preparing, storing food on campus, you must have an environmental health inspection done on the proposed school.
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 and Cash Management Update and Finance Guide for Charter Schools (2020 update). Important: A Valid Education Certificate of Occupancy must be on file with OCS for all buildings which serve students before funds will be released to the school.

 - (a.) Establish accounting services – accounting services of the school's choice.
 - (b.) Establish a bank account. *
 - (c.) 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 (CSADM) Projection System in early June 2024.*
 - (d.) Apply for a Unique Entity ID and register on System for Award Management (SAM).
 - (e.) Develop and approve a regular budget for the 2024 - 2025 school year (Based on projected student enrollment numbers)
 - (f.) Develop and approve a break-even budget for the 2024 - 2025 school year. This budget should reflect the minimum number of students the school can enroll and still remain financially viable.
 - (g.) Complete school data in EDDIE. This includes the following: board chair, board vice chair, school leaders, school physical address, school mailing address, and school contact information.
 - (h.) Process initiated for obtaining Federal Tax-Exempt Status (due no later than 24 months following final approval of the application, not final approval to open). Apply for this as soon as you start your application.
 - (i.) 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 hbrinqueries@nctreasurer.com.)
 - (j.) 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 "k" below.
 - (k.) 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 or 4. A deed of trust.
 - (l.) Identify LGC-approved CPA firm to perform annual audit (annually due by October 31st). Please check to make sure your auditor is on this list.

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

- (a.) Testing/accountability coordinator job description developed. Please see Testing Manual here and exemplar.
- (b.) Develop draft of testing calendar. Please see Operational Testing Calendar here.
- (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.) 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. Remember, at will employment means the employer, or employee, may end the relationship at any time, with, or without cause.
- (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, through May/June (regional meetings/training, site-based training, etc.).
- (e.) Beginning Teacher Support Program Plan has been approved by the Regional Education Facilitator. You submit the plan to your REF and then send you a form telling you the BTSP plan has been approved. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/educatoreffectiveness/regional/>
- (f.) A hiring and licensure plan is in place. This plan should detail how the school will hire staff, responsibilities for the hiring process, carry out background checks, review the SBE revoked license list, as well as ensure that 50% of teaching staff are licensed in compliance with state law.

8. Exceptional Children

- (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. 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.) An EC 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 (compared to h), which is your PD plan for full school staff.
- (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.). IDEA and Parent Rights & Responsibilities: NC Notice of Procedural Safeguards
- (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 + Procedural Safeguards: Handbook on Parent's Rights (on-hand at the school and readily available to families & staff)

9. MTSS

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 need this additional assistance. v. Indicate how students will be identified as needing extra support.

v. Indicate how individual progress for each of these students will be determined.

10. Transportation Plan is in place and aligns with the DPI-approved plan.

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. 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). The school has secured buses either through the resident district or an alternative vendor (if applicable). Buses shall be inspected in a timely manner to ensure deficiencies can be fixed prior to the opening of the school. Contact the Transportation Division at DPI to seek feedback regarding the plan and purchased buses. Reach out to Kevin.Harrison@dpi.nc.gov for support and direction.

11. Lunch Service Policies are adopted and align with the DPI-approved plan.

If participating in the National School Lunch Program, contact Jacquelyn McGowan, jacquelyn.mcgowan@dpi.nc.gov, and 984-236-2909 and ensure all steps are followed with fidelity (begin in January 2024). Refer to the NC DPI Child Nutrition Division. 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. Plan will detail how you will identify students who may be educationally or economically disadvantaged and communicate with their families that they may avail themselves of your optional plan. Tell us who, how, when, and make sure your budget backs up your plan. Tell us how you will remove barriers to students accessing lunch. Ensure any contracted vendors meet local codes (Local Health Department).

12. School Health and Safety Standards are adopted and meet the requirements under § 115C-218.75(a). Please be mindful that these would include health related items, check the statute to see the exact wording y

13. 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.e. put your policies on your website.

i. 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 actual Lottery Application.) 6. Records Retention 7. Student Records 8. Family and School Communication 9. Campus Visitors

ii. 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

iii. Finances

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

14. Handbooks

- (a.) Student and Family Handbook (including student behavior policies) The official handbook, which should be available online and in hard copy, should include all of the operations and instructional programming policies within the handbook as well.)
- (b.) Employee handbook has been adopted by the board.

Charter School Initial Board Guidelines and Expectations

Complete Ready to Open Progress Report

- Ready to Open Progress Report – Part 1 due November 27, 2023.
- Ready to Open Progress Report – Part 2 due February 26, 2024
- Ready to Open Progress Report – Part 3 due May 20, 2024

- All 3 parts of the progress report will include:
 - Evidence of progress/completion regarding the criteria noted in the checklist.
 - Finalized and board approved policy manuals and handbooks

Ready to Open Meeting

Location and format: The RTO meeting will be held during a CSAB meeting in June 2024. Board members of schools that have insufficient ratings in any area in RTOPR3 will be required to appear before the CSAB to address the major concerns noted in the RTOPR3 evaluation rubric. Board members should be ready to answer any questions related to 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, part 2, part 3) may be reported to the Charter School Review Board, who may delay the opening. In addition, OCS reserves the right to recommend termination of the charter school if 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.

RTO Evaluation

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.