

Establishing a Legacy of Success

A CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL LEADER SUCCESSION PLANNING AND TRANSITION GUIDE

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Overview

Leadership transitions are inevitable in any organization, including charter public schools. Managed well, they are an opportunity for a school to grow and develop into a stronger institution. But managing the transition well takes advance planning - and that planning needs to begin well before a leader even considers leaving.

In many ways, leading a school is like a relay race with each leader representing a runner holding the baton. The success of the relay team doesn't lay with an individual runner - it lays with the collection of runners AND requires a smooth transfer of the baton from one runner to the next. In this metaphor, it is the responsibility of the charter public school's board of trustees ("board") to ensure that the transfer of the baton is smooth and that the next runner is chosen and ready to run when handed the baton.

We know that leaders leave for a variety of reasons - both voluntarily and involuntarily. We also know that leaders may need to take a temporary leave of absence and another leader must serve as an interim. And we know that absences or departures can be planned or unplanned. In all of these situations, the "baton" is being passed between one leader and the next and the board needs to ensure it happens effectively. The purpose of this guide is to support boards with any of these transitions. This guide is not meant to be a list of instructions - rather a set of reflections and best practices that boards may want to consider if appropriate to their specific situation.

The first section of this guide outlines what boards and leaders can do *now* to plan for an eventual leadership transition. In fact, there are many steps a school can take while a current leader is in place (without plans to leave) that allow for the eventual smooth transfer to a new leader.

The second section of the guide outlines the steps a board should take when a leader has announced their departure¹. This section provides guidance on how a board might answer questions such as: What kind of leader does our organization need now? What is the best way to conduct a search for a new leader? Who should be involved?

The final section focuses on the installation and on-boarding of a new leader to make sure they can get up to speed as quickly as possible.

¹ Throughout the document, in an attempt to be as inclusive as possible, we have employed the use of non-binary pronouns (they, them, theirs).

Finally, this guide was written with the following goals in mind:

1. **Minimize disruptions as much as possible:** Throughout a leadership transition, the work of the school does not stop. It is essential that a succession plan allows for as little disruption as possible to the ongoing work of the school. Every action should be taken with the goal of creating stability for the school's teachers, staff, students, and families.
2. **Plan for the future success of the new leader:** Planning for the successful transition of a new leader begins before the previous leader announces their departure. And the new leader will need support and structures to support their success when they begin.
3. **Use the leadership transition as an opportunity:** Leadership transitions are another opportunity for your board to step back, reflect and reassess what is most needed, at this time, in your institution. Leadership transitions are also an opportunity to build capacity in your organization for future leaders and organizational stability. Finally, leadership transitions are an excellent opportunity to build goodwill among key stakeholders for your institution.

We thank the leaders and board members who supported the creation of this guide - either by participating in our interviews or sharing their school's documents. This guide was written based on the input and hard-earned wisdom from Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter Public School, Bridge Boston Charter Public School, Christa McAuliffe Regional Charter Public School, KIPP Academy Charter Public School, Lawrence Family Development Charter Public School, Marblehead Community Charter Public School, Martha's Vineyard Charter Public School, Match Charter Public School, Neighborhood House Charter Public School, Salem Academy Charter Public School, Sizer, A North Central Essential School, and Veritas Charter Public School.

Things to Have In Place Now to Build Sustainability

Succession planning is about sustaining your organization through major leadership changes. But there are many things you can do now to ensure your school is ready for a leadership change, even when a leader's departure is not imminent. The goal is to manage your organization with the understanding that the people in the organization will come and go; the organization needs to be strong enough to withstand employee turnover at every level.

“Succession planning is more about the conversation than what’s written on paper. It’s a mindset that the transition is inevitable and the organization will outlive any particular leader. Therefore, make sure you start this discussion early and return to it often across the organization.” - School Leader

Plan with your current leader

With that in mind, the first step a board should take is to talk with its current leader about the eventuality of a leadership transition - to establish the leader's personal plans, encourage a strong leader to stay with the organization as long as possible, and ensure that the leader is engaging in planning for their inevitable departure at some point in the future. Use the annual review to check in with a leader and understand how they feel about the institution and their plans for their future. Use the strategic planning process and annual goal setting to set succession planning goals for the leader and the organization. These communications should be handled delicately - your leader shouldn't feel pushed out. Rather, the board can use the opportunity to express their hope that the leader will stay, as well as fulfill its key purpose: to ensure that the school has a strong leader in place at all times, including maintaining continuity and stability through leadership transitions. You may also use these conversations to develop a culture and set of expectations around transition planning throughout the leadership team, not just for the Executive Director.

In these conversations about eventual leadership transitions, you might also ask your leader to give your board sufficient notice of a decision to leave, if possible. Ideally, your leader will give you enough notice so that your board can conduct a search for her replacement in the December-February timeframe. (Note that if you *require* (rather than request) a particular notice period, your leader may have legal claim to the same length of notice should you decide to terminate them.)

Develop a “Critical Systems Back-Up Plan”

Each school should have a “critical systems back-up plan” in place. It is the responsibility of the school leader and their team to create this back-up plan; the board's role is to make sure this happens.

The back-up plan allows an organization to continue to serve students well even when a leader is suddenly unavailable for their job. A number of schools report having the following documents in a centralized place as part of their “critical systems back-up plan”:

- Updated job descriptions for the School Leader and all key employees;
- Task lists of what each key employee does each day, week, month, quarter, year;
- An annual calendar that highlights all of the things that happen regularly throughout the year (instructional, professional development, governance, development, reporting, etc.). A good resource to begin this may be the MCPSA's [“Arc of the Year Gantt Chart”](#);
- A list of where everything is located that is critical for daily operations;
- A password list for key databases (access to key financial, student, and DESE information); and
- A list of all critical relationships with contact information (such as legal, financial, regulatory, media, HR, DESE, etc.) that ensure your school's operations run smoothly.

It is a good idea to create specific plans for who will step into each leadership role in the case of an emergency. Having a chart like [this](#) in advance will allow your school to be prepared for the potential of a leader or a critical member of the leadership team getting hit by the proverbial bus (or winning the lottery!).

It is essential that these documents exist in a place that is accessible by multiple people. Additionally, all key employees who might be expected to step into a different role or take on additional responsibilities should know about those expectations, roles, and responsibilities in advance.

Finally, be sure to include in your back-up plan a step to inform your liaison at DESE's Charter School Office if your leader is changing - even just for a temporary leave of absence. You might also want to let [Lina Musayev](#) or any other staff member at MCPSCA know in case there are ways MCPSCA staff members can support an interim or new leader.

Build Sustainability into School Routines

Set an expectation that your leader will build systems and processes throughout the organization that capture and codify the work of the organization on an ongoing basis. Expect your leader to develop a collaborative culture that allows people to understand how decisions are made and implemented (and by whom). If you have a collaborative leadership structure, clear organizational systems and processes, and strong documentation of the actual work, your organization will be in a much better position to withstand personnel transitions, planned or unplanned.

There are a variety of ways to build your organization's sustainability through systems and processes, including:

- **Leverage technology.** Maintain cloud-based databases for things like fundraising, student information, finances, HR, communications, and governance.² Make sure multiple people know how to use these systems. Use Google or DropBox for maintaining files to ensure they can easily be transferred from one leader to the next. Use a virtual conferencing platform (e.g., Zoom) that allows for teams to work virtually should a leader be unavailable to come into work (but still able to work).
- **Maintain up-to-date job descriptions.** Update job descriptions annually, perhaps at the point of each annual review. Share job descriptions in a central place for easy access by others, so it is clear who is responsible for what throughout the organization.
- **Codify practices and procedures.** This is important across the organization - and especially so for those work flows where the School Leader takes the lead or acts on their own. Keep these documents in a central place where many have access to them.

² Note that you should make sure to balance the need for using these cloud based platforms and ensuring that secure information remains secure.

- **Cross-train.** In larger organizations, make sure more than one person knows how critical functions get done (e.g., filing financial reports with the state). Smaller organizations may struggle given that they have fewer employees; they should rely on codifying procedures. Here is an excellent [powerpoint](#) shared by a MA charter public school that walks through how organizations might codify practices and cross-train employees.

“Transparency is critical to organizational stability. Transparency in actions, decision making, communications. The more people who know how things operate and why, the greater the chance that the organization can sustain through a leadership transition.” - Former School Leader

Build Your Leadership Bench

Finally, many schools benefit from identifying and investing in future leaders within their buildings. Great leaders are hard to find - especially leaders who will be able to maintain a strong school culture in your building. The best way to ensure that quality leaders will be ready to step into your open leadership positions is to develop them in-house. This could mean supporting upcoming leaders in training programs; it could also mean finding opportunities for them to participate in existing leadership opportunities in the school.

It's important to remember, though, that it is the board's responsibility to appoint the school leader; it is not the current leader's job to appoint their successor. Be sure to work closely with your current leader to understand what they are doing to develop a leadership bench - without promising future leadership positions to anyone in particular. (See section on Searches below to learn more about internal candidates.)

“When you think about building your leadership bench, don't forget to consider compliance. If a leader needs a certain credential, help your employee get that credential.” - School Leader

Shore Up Your Own Practices, Too!

While this work is happening within the school building, the board can also be preparing for an eventual leadership transition.

First and foremost - ensure that your board is high-functioning. The easiest way to lose a leader is to be a board that a great leader doesn't want to work for. And any new leader you may hire will want to make sure you are a board with which they can effectively collaborate. Use the

[MCPSA board resources](#) (Password: MCPSA) to access a number of helpful resources to become the board that attracts and retains great leaders.

Build the expertise on your board to support leadership transitions (and other board work). For example:

- Aim to have board members with expertise in HR/personnel and communication.
- Ensure you have enough board members to allow for the additional workload of a leader search and transition, in addition to all of the other regular and timely board work required.
- Build your board's equity lens - the ability for your board to recognize their own biases, power, and privilege in order to reduce the negative impact of these damaging biases on board members, the school leader, faculty, staff, families, and students.

Finally, leadership transitions can be costly - especially if your school needs to pay multiple leader salaries during a transition or wants to hire a search firm to complete a search. Plan for this inevitability - and build up a reserve account so you have the money when you need it.

You Know Your Leader is Leaving

Once you know your leader is leaving, the leadership transition truly begins. The work now falls into three phases:

- 1) Plan the search and transition;**
- 2) Implement the search process; and**
- 3) Manage the transition.**

Each of these should be led by the board (and assigned to a specific board member) with input, as appropriate, from the Executive Director or other members of the school's leadership team. Be sure to delineate the expected roles for each member involved. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to see a few excellent examples of transition plans that clearly outline the expected roles in the search and transition process.

Before you begin these phases, though, you should inform your school's liaison at DESE's Charter School Office that your leader is leaving. You might also reach out to [Lina Musayev](#) at MCPSA to let her know of the leader transition - MCPSA may be able to provide guidance and resources to your board.

Plan the Search and Transition

As soon as you know your leader is leaving, get started. A search typically takes 4-6 months and you want to be looking for candidates when candidates are looking for you! Don't forget the

school-year cadence of education; Executive Director candidates are looking in the winter for a position that starts in the summer, in advance of the new school year.

No matter how many times your board has worked through a leadership transition, you will want to approach *this* search anew - your school's context and strategic needs have undoubtedly changed since your last search, even if it was a year ago. Your board members may have changed, too.

The first thing you will need to do is identify a board member who will lead the search; this could be different from the board member who will lead the transition, though often the relationship with the new leader begins during the search process. In any case, the board member will need sufficient time to oversee the search and transition processes. Depending on the phase of the search and whether or not you hire a search firm, the board member leading the work may spend considerable time each week on this work.

And then, almost simultaneously, you will need to consider each of the following.

Determine if an Interim Leader is Required While a Search is Conducted

Most often, a board chooses to hire an interim leader when a gap in time is anticipated between the departure of one leader and the arrival of the next. Perhaps the leader suddenly departs in the middle of the school year; perhaps the leader provided notice in March that they intend to leave in June, without sufficient time to complete a full search. *It is essential that a leader is always in place* - so if a gap is anticipated, an interim leader is necessary.

With this in mind, it is especially important to understand the timeline for a search. The typical leader search requires 4-6 months, including time needed for development of a position description, an assessment of the school's needs, or, if a school chooses to do so, hiring a search consultant. The best time to search for a new leader is November-February; typically, senior leaders in education are in the job market at this time, which allows them to provide their current district with sufficient notice of their departure. So depending on when your leader gives you notice and how long you think your search will take, you may need to hire an interim leader.

If you do hire an interim leader, it's essential to clarify expectations at the start:

- Will you consider the interim leader as a candidate for the search?
- Is your interim leader even interested in the permanent position?
- What support does the interim leader need to succeed in the position?
- Do you need to fill in the interim leader's current position?

Where do you find an interim leader? Often, schools look to other internal school leaders to identify an interim leader. Other good sources may be retired school leaders (district or charter) or retired non-profit leaders. You may also want to reach out to the MCPSA staff members who can help you network within the sector.

Some schools have considered asking a current board member to step down and serve in the capacity of an interim leader. To avoid violating the state ethics laws, we strongly suggest that you call the State Ethics Commission at 617-371-9500, to understand the complexity of a move such as this. For example, a board member cannot be *eligible to be considered* to serve as the interim executive director (paid or unpaid) for 30 days after leaving their post. In other words, the search for an interim would need to begin and include other potential candidates 30 days after the board member stepped down. (Calling the State Ethics Commission results in a response within 24-48 hours; emailing may take up to 30 days.)

Determine if a Search Firm is Needed

Search firms can be an invaluable resource during a search for a variety of reasons. Searches are extremely time-intensive; often, boards do not have enough bandwidth to take this work on themselves. Additionally, a search firm can bring an outside perspective into the work - to guide the school's understanding of what is needed in the role, to help benchmark compensation levels, and to broaden the applicant pool beyond what a board may surface on their own. (This can be especially true when trying to develop a racially diverse candidate pool.) And, a search firm brings necessary HR expertise and thought partnership to the board - this is especially important if the expertise does not already reside on the board. Search consultants can also help facilitate open dialogue with board members who have different views about what type of leader is needed.

On the other hand, search firms are costly. If you have not planned for this expense, you may also be able to consider if a search consultant can help with specific elements of the search process with the board taking responsibility for the rest. For example, you may hire a search firm to help you develop the position description (see below), but choose to conduct the actual search, including advertising, on your own. You may decide that you know of enough potential strong candidates (including internal candidates) such that you believe you can have a strong candidate pool without the aid of a search firm, but you want help with the interview process.

If your board chooses not to hire a search firm, make sure that you have access to adequate expertise in the legalities surrounding your search, including which parts of your search must be conducted in accordance with the [Open Meeting Law](#) and [HR laws](#), such as what questions are illegal to ask in an interview. Your school's legal counsel or an HR contractor such as [HR Knowledge](#) may be a great resource for these topics. Be sure, however, that your school's internal HR team is not leading the search - such an arrangement could create conflicts and confusion, especially as it relates to managing the line between governance and management.

A list of search firms recently used by Massachusetts charter public schools is included in the Appendix.

Form a Search Committee

You will need to build a Search Committee and populate it with members of your school community. You will want to think strategically about who should be on it - which types of stakeholders (with what levels of representation) and which individuals, specifically. For example, you may decide you want to have three board members on it - and that they are the board members who will be most involved with the new leader's transition into the position (e.g., the board member assigned to the transition and the board chair / incoming board chair). You may decide you want to have stakeholders who are the strongest voices among their peers - so that they can help champion the new leader when they arrive. If possible, you will want to have members of the leadership team, faculty, or staff share information with the committee on any standard hiring procedures the school already uses; coordinate on-site visits and interviews; and provide information about and transparency for the process for other members of the school community.

What is the appropriate size of a search committee? You will need a search committee that is large enough to get the work done and represent the various constituents and expertise needed, but not so large that it slows down your process or hinders open dialogue. Ideally, your search committee should include 5-8 people. That doesn't mean those 5-8 people must do all of the work - you can still rely on people outside of the search committee to support the search - whether that be administrative support (scheduling and such) or for gathering input into the process.

“This is a significant amount of work for board members, especially the chair of the Search Committee. Don’t underestimate what will be needed.” - Board Chair

Follow the Open Meeting Law

It is also important to note that the Search Committee is considered an ad hoc board subcommittee - and thus is subject to the [Open Meeting Law](#). That said, you will want to maintain the confidentiality of your candidates. In order to do this, we encourage you to follow the guidance provided here:

- The full Board, in open meeting, should vote to create a Search Committee as a sub-committee of the Board. This motion, discussion and approval must be completed in open session and recorded in the minutes. If the full board does not create a Search sub-committee, then all subsequent search discussions and votes by the full board must be in open session.
- The Search Committee must consist of fewer members than a quorum of the full Board, but can include other members of the community who are not on the full Board. For example, if your full Board has 7 members, then the Search Committee can have no

more than 3 members of the Board. However, the Search Committee can include as many additional non-Board members as the full Board deems appropriate.

- All preliminary Search Committee screening interviews / discussions can be held in executive session under Exemption 8 of the Open Meeting Law. The Search Committee may hold multiple rounds of interviews and discussions in executive session. The Search Committee should still follow Open Meeting Law procedures and convene in open session, then conduct a roll call vote to move into Executive Session under Exemption 8. Prior to voting to enter each executive session, the Search Committee chair must state in the open record that an open meeting to discuss this business will have a detrimental effect in obtaining qualified candidates.
- That said, after the Search Committee votes to recommend the final candidates to the full Board, all future Search Committee and full Board meetings concerning this topic, including subsequent consideration of the recommended candidates, must be in open session.
- Candidates should be made aware of this process up front.

It is important to note that once the Search Committee has nominated candidates for full board consideration, neither the full Board nor the Search Committee should continue to accept new applicants. Additionally, based upon the state of current Massachusetts law, it is recommended that Search Committees provide the full Board with at least 2 candidates for consideration to comply with the spirit and purpose of the Open Meeting Law.

If your Board or Search Committee violates the Open Meeting Law, a possible consequence is that the hiring decision will be deemed null and void - and you will need to start the search anew. With that said, make sure you follow the Open Meeting Law!

Determine What Role, if Any, Your Outgoing Leader Will Play in the Search and Transition

Unless you have a really compelling reason (and we're not sure what that could be), your outgoing leader should not be on your search committee. Hiring a new leader is an opportunity to reflect and be deeply thoughtful about what type of leader your school needs, at this time. In general, you are not trying to hire a replacement for your existing leader, you are hiring for the future - and that will require a leader with different skills and characteristics. Having your existing leader in the room can make it tricky to navigate reflective conversations (committee members won't want to offend your current leader); it may also be difficult for your current leader to imagine the future of the school without them, even if it was their decision to leave.

That said, your current leader will likely be a great source of information for your search. They may know of potential candidates for the position or good, non-traditional places to post the opening. They may have good ideas for performance tasks that really get at the challenges of the leadership position. And they are certainly likely to be able to identify challenges the new leader will face in their position. Their input and opinion about how candidates would fare in a

community that they know well or on the skillset and strengths/weaknesses of candidates (even just finalists) can be useful. While the current leader may not be on the search committee, bringing in the leader for input can also be helpful to build buy-in for the rest of the school staff, as well. If your relationship with your current leader remains strong, be sure to tap into their knowledge where it makes sense.

“When you know your leader plans to leave, spend the time “off-boarding” them. Have them train other people in the organization to do parts of their job - and those people can help train the new leader. Even if you think there will be overlap between the new and old leaders, there might not be.” - School Leader

You may also want to begin conversations about what role, if any, your current leader will have in the transition of your new leader. This is an important but difficult question to manage - and will depend on the willingness/ability of your current leader to stay for a transition as well as your new leader’s interest in having their predecessor “hang around.” It will also depend on your current leader’s ability to step back and relinquish their role when a new leader comes on board - something that is often hard to predict, despite the humility your leader may have presented in the past. In any case, candidates in the search process may ask what type of transition is possible or expected - and you will want to have some understanding of what your departing leader is willing or able to do.

Assess Your Institution and Develop the School Leader Position

Description

The point of a leadership transition is an excellent opportunity to assess your institution and re-evaluate what type of leader you need, at this time, to meet the mission of your school. Schools often conduct a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), gathering input from various stakeholders (board, faculty, staff, students, parents, community members, donors, etc.) to deeply understand what may be needed in a new leader. This is certainly an opportunity to build relationships with your stakeholders - and maintain their commitment to the school, even through the leadership transition.

Even if you have a School Leader position description in place already, you will want to revise it and update it based on your assessment of the institution and an understanding of the qualities you would like in your new leader. These may be different than what you needed from your current leader. Spend the time upfront to align your team around a prioritization of skills and characteristics you want to see in your candidate; this will guide your team throughout the process and support decision-making when there is disagreement.

“Everything is easier when the board agrees on the big picture issues - whatever those are for each school. Make sure to find consensus about what is most important.” - Board Chair

You may also want to expand your position description to provide more information about this particular opportunity and the school community or context, especially as a means to communicate and market the position to external candidates. It is especially important to share the mission, vision, and values of your school in the position description to ensure your candidates understand what is most important to your school.

As you define the position description, you will also want to determine what salary range you can offer. The MCPSA has terrific benchmarking data for charter salaries through their annual [compensation survey](#); you may also want to consider what local superintendents or private school leaders earn. (Public school data is publicly available.) Think about who your competition is for your candidates and try to benchmark against them. This may be an especially sensitive issue if you learn your new salary range needs to be higher than what you currently pay your school leader - or if offering a competitive salary to your new school leader will create significant inequities among the rest of the staff. You will want to proceed with caution and consider carefully what your budget can sustain, what your competition offers, and what expertise and skill you truly need in your new school leader.

You do want to find a way to communicate a salary range to potential candidates early in the process and ensure that the ranges are acceptable to them. This can be done within the job description itself or it can be discussed during your initial interview. (Be sure, though, not to ask for candidates' salary history - that is illegal!) The worst outcome of a search is to spend months going through a search and interviewing candidates only to find that your desired candidate expects more than you are willing to pay - and you have to start over.

Know Your Plan B

At this point, you have made the decision to find a permanent Executive Director. And in the best scenario, the best candidate who emerges from your process is also someone you are excited about leading your school. However, it is possible that you don't find anyone in the process that you are excited about. Rather than “settle” for a less than optimal candidate, know your Plan B. Can you appoint an interim leader while your team reconvenes and conducts another search? Will your exiting leader be flexible about their departure date? Is there a local retired school leader who can hold down the fort while your board regroups for the year?

Most importantly, identify your Plan B at the outset so that your board can focus on finding a leader you are truly excited about without worrying about a lapse in leadership in the short term.

Communicate Throughout the Process

Leadership transitions are, perhaps, one of the most destabilizing experiences for a charter public school community. Employees wonder how their professional lives might change. Students and parents wonder if a new leader will make changes that alter their desire to be in the school. Community partners wonder if a new leader's priorities will allow for continued partnership. Everyone knows change is coming - and no one knows if that change will be to their benefit or detriment.

One of the most important jobs of the search committee, therefore, is to communicate with stakeholders throughout this entire process. Much of this communication can be two-way, especially if the community will be involved in the school assessment and interview processes.

Even when the search committee can only communicate *out* what is happening in the search process, they can do so in a way to allay the normal fears and build commitment to the school among stakeholders. Efforts should be made to ensure that communication is timed to key milestones of the process - when a leader announces their departure (See the Appendix for samples of departure announcements); when a search committee is formed; when input is gathered from / shared with the community; when the committee has finalists to consider; when a new leader is hired. These communications can reflect the values of the school and the stated desires of the school community and ensure the transparency of the process while maintaining the confidentiality of the candidates, whose imminent departure may not yet be known by their current employers. Remember that transparency includes communication about both the *process* and the *thinking behind the process* in order to effectively convey the values of the school.

Be sure each communication reaches all stakeholders, not preferencing one group over another. That said, you may want to rely on your standard ways of communicating with each stakeholder group so that stakeholders will know where to find the latest information. If you are in doubt, choose to over communicate.

Implement the Search Process

As with most challenges, a good plan makes the implementation much easier. Following the steps above, you have likely created the broad outline of your search process - now you need to implement!

But - there's more planning. Of course.

Define the Search Process

While you may have identified the months within which you will do the search, you now need to set the timeline for the various stages of the search. Your search will include time for advertising and developing the candidate pool; time for the stages of the interview process; time for decision making and time for making the offer. If you are working with a search consultant, the consultant will be able to advise on the timeline and offer suggestions for shortening it, if need be. Below are a few thoughts to consider for each stage.

- **Advertising.** What are the characteristics of your ideal candidate - and how will you reach those candidates? How will you ensure you are reaching a diverse population of leaders? What budget do you have for advertising and where will you get the greatest “bang for your buck”?
- **Networking.** Often, we rely on our networks to surface candidates - and that can be a great way to surface people who may already know something about your school. But how can you reach into other networks to find people with new perspectives or different backgrounds who may help lead your school into the future? This is especially important if you are looking for diverse candidates who may have historically been underrepresented in your leadership.
- **Resume screening.** How will you screen applications? What will be required from candidates? Who will be involved in this step? Can you “anonymize” applications to ensure no biases impact your selection?
- **Interviews.** What will be your interview process to whittle down your candidate pool to a reasonable set of finalists? How do you make this consistent and fair across all candidates? What portions will be done in person versus virtually? Who will be involved, what will their role be and how will they be trained? What performance tasks will you ask of your candidates to truly assess their ability to perform the job? How will you assess for the various skills and characteristics you decided were “non-negotiables” when you developed the position description?

***“Make sure you weed people out early - or you will have too many “finalists!”
- Board Member***

Once you have answers to these questions (and others that will inevitably arise!) you can map out your timeline. However, you may find that it is difficult to adhere to your timeline. For example, what if a great candidate surfaces late in the process - after you think you have finished with resume screening and first round interviews. How will you respond? Or what if your search does not produce any viable candidates? Or if your search does produce candidates, just not with the priority qualities or skills that you identified at the outset?

Your timeline may also be impacted by outside factors - unforeseen challenges that the school might face that could impact the Search Committee’s ability to do it’s work. Sustained extreme

weather, major facility issues, or a global pandemic could cause delays in your process or a need to rethink how you will conduct your search.

No matter what may cause a timeline to slip, it is important that the Search Committee keeps its focus on the end goal - having a high quality leader in place in time for a smooth transition. This may require significant creativity to meet with candidates or deliberate as a committee. And in some cases, it may require a Search Committee to hire an interim leader until the school is in a better position to hire one permanently.

It is also important to discuss upfront how disagreement will be managed on the search committee. What values can you agree on? What criteria can you agree on? What process will you use if you disagree on final candidates? This is where the position description can come in handy - especially if you spent that time prioritizing what is important!

“While you definitely want to look for consensus, and you will need to be patient through this process, the board chair may also need to take a position without pleasing 100% of the community - and run with it.” - Former Board Chair

Also keep in mind that anytime a quorum of your board (or a subcommittee of your board) convenes, they need to follow the Open Meeting Law (see [guidance](#) from Barton Gilman LLP - click on the “MA Open Meeting Law and Public Records Law Resources” tab). Keep this in mind as you design your search process - and limit the exposure of individual candidates who may need to remain **confidential** until later in the process.

Finally, always remember that while your interview process is designed to help you learn about your candidates, they are also learning about you in every interaction. You want to make sure you are a school your candidates want to work for - and if a candidate accepts your job, that you have already begun to build a strong relationship with them.

Sample interview processes are included in the Appendix. Creating an effective interview process may also be a good place for your current school leader to engage and provide support.

Handling Internal Candidates

Whether or not you have explicitly tried to develop a leadership pipeline, you may have internal candidates who emerge in your process. You will want to manage their candidacy confidentially and respectfully - keeping in mind that you will likely want those candidates to continue working at your school even if you hire someone else.

If you have had the fortunate position to develop a leadership pipeline and have a “chosen” candidate, you will still want to conduct a formal search; you might just not prioritize broadening your candidate pool. Be sure to treat your internal candidate the same as your external candidates during each step of the interview process. Conducting a search gives you an opportunity to really get to know your internal candidate directly - it is likely your prior relationship was filtered through your School Leader. The interview process is an opportunity to get to know the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses - and your board will need to be ready to support the candidate’s needs.

Additionally, the search process provides your internal candidate with a level of legitimacy that simply appointing them might not. Even the best supported candidates will have their detractors - parents, employees, students. It is important for your entire community to know that you chose this candidate from the best candidates who came forward. The search process will also provide your school community the opportunity to get to know your internal candidate in a new way - and begin to envision them as the school leader.

Engage Community Stakeholders

As noted before, it is critical that you engage your community’s stakeholders throughout the interview process. At a minimum, this should be in the form of outgoing communications. Keep your community updated about the progress of the search, even if you can’t provide specifics about candidates. Be sure to use the same channels your school typically uses to communicate.

Ideally, you will engage your community in the interview process, as well. Perhaps you have panels of various stakeholders engage with the candidate and provide feedback to the search committee (making sure they know their voice is just one of many in the process and they are providing input, not making decisions or managing the process). Or maybe you invite stakeholders to meet with the candidate in an informal forum when they visit the campus. Each of these meetings is an opportunity for your community to begin to envision a different leader at the school. The more you engage the community in the interview process, the easier a transition your new leader will have.

Hire the New Leader

After all of that work, it is time to make an offer! You should already know whether your candidate can accept the offer you are able to provide - hopefully you confirmed that early in the process. That said, coming to terms with the new leader still may take a little time - and can be a nerve-wracking process. Be sure to plan for time to negotiate with the new leader.

No doubt, your school community will be eagerly awaiting your news! Make sure to have a communications plan ready to execute when your offer is accepted. Examples of communications plans are included in the Appendix. You can always reach out to MCPSA (lmusayev@masscharterschools.org) for communications support.

You've Hired Your New Leader. Now What?

Congratulations! You have hired your new leader! While you may believe your work is done, it is actually just getting started. Now is the time you need to make sure your leader is set up for success - and it is your job, as the board, to make that happen. Of course, your new leader needs to be a partner at the table in determining how this transition will work, too.

“For all the time that you place in searching for and finding a new person, the on-boarding process is absolutely the most critical and longer process.” - Board Chair

Form a Transition Team

If you haven't already, you will want to appoint a board member to be the point person for your new leader's transition. Ideally, this is someone your new leader has already developed a relationship with through the search process - but it doesn't have to be. No matter what, it should be someone who has deep knowledge about the school's mission and programs, school's finances, past challenges and successes, along with anything on the horizon that the new leader needs to know. And this point person should also clearly understand the distinction between board and staff roles. Ideally, this role will not be filled by the Chair - the Board Chair needs to keep the full board running; the transition team leader can be a time consuming post.

Some schools then form a transition committee to support the new leader. At this stage, the board member leading the transition should involve the new leader and understand what they may need to support their transition. After all, once they are appointed, they will be responsible for getting up to speed - and they may have a clear picture of what their needs are. Of course, it is also likely that they don't know what they don't know. This is where the exiting leader may be helpful - identifying learning areas for the incoming leader.

“I found it helpful to include the existing administrative team members on my transition committee.” - New School Leader

Create a Transition Plan

With your new leader, you should create a transition plan. (And this plan will inform who else should be on a transition team!) Your plan should be driven by those actions that allow your leader to learn what they need to know and build the relationships they will need to have as quickly as possible.

“My transition plan was highly structured, inclusive, and visible. I found it extremely helpful.” - New School Leader

Some suggested elements of the plan include:

1. Reviewing important school documents so your new leader can understand your school’s strengths and areas for growth. (Include time to read these documents, and the opportunity to ask questions.) If you didn’t already share a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis with your leader in the interview process, this would be a good time to do so! You should also include recent annual reports, strategic plans, charter amendments, board minutes, annual calendar, budget, various action plans, etc. It is especially important to consider a leader’s background - and potential gaps in knowledge about Massachusetts charter schools - when identifying important school documents to review.
2. Building relationships internally. Start with the leader’s direct reports and build outwards. Find opportunities for your leader to introduce themselves to the faculty and staff and begin to engage with them. Your leader should use these initial meetings to learn about the school as well - perhaps checking their understanding from the documents they are also reviewing.

“I highly recommend a listening tour where the leader learns what is working and what is not, rather than imposing their vision on the staff and students. What worked in the past? Why? What was tried in the past? Why didn’t it work or did it? One of the best ways to learn is simply by listening to others.” - New School Leader

3. Building relationships externally. Think about your various constituents and stakeholders and build a plan for your leader to meet them. In many cases, it might make sense for a trusted employee, board member, or community partner to support introductions. In some cases, the leader may be able to “cold call” those constituents and build their relationship on their own. It may also make sense for existing staff or board members to “own” some relationships with external constituents until your new leader is fully up to speed - this will allow your school to keep the relationships growing even when the new leader is swamped, and still allow for them to be picked up by the leader when the time is right. A key external relationship to keep in mind is that with the Department of Elementary

and Secondary Education (DESE)! Make sure your leader connects with your school's liaison at the Charter School Office.

Make sure your plan also includes ample opportunities for staff, families, and students to meet the new leader in person, ideally before they officially start - and the step to communicate this broadly!

“It may be helpful to invite the new leader in to major school events or the board retreat, even if they haven’t started yet. These will help provide the context for the program and/or help them begin to develop relationships with their key stakeholders.” - Board Chair

You may also want to review your school's annual calendar with your incoming and outgoing leaders - and identify any projects or deliverables for which you need your outgoing leader's input. For example, schools often ask the outgoing leader to support the completion of the Annual Report or Renewal application when the leader transition occurs over the summer. See transition plan examples in the Appendix.

Work With Your New Leader to Develop a Support Network

You will want to help your new leader create a support network, as well. One excellent place to start is the MCPSA New Leaders Program, a cohort-based model that provides technical and adaptive leadership support in a group setting and through individual coaching. (And it's free for MCPSA members!) You can find more information [here](#) or in the Appendix.

MCPSA New Leaders Program Testimonials:

“The New Charter Leader program has been an invaluable tool for me in my transition year. It has provided me with PD I can immediately apply to my everyday work -- around equity, budgets, boards, employee culture, and more. It has given me an opportunity to leave my campus once a month and meet with other leaders. It can be tough to get off campus as a leader, especially a new one, but this networking is so crucial for both personal and professional growth. The cohort of new leaders, as well as the MCPSA facilitators, are a constant source of support and challenge as I tackle this daily learning curve. And finally, the one-on-one coaching has been so helpful as I confront dilemmas both large and small. I am so grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this group.” - Cohort 2 New School Leader

“It has been great to meet and get to know others in similar roles and benefit from the coaching provided by a former charter leader herself. The most impactful component from my perspective, has been consultancy protocols in every session wherein we

took turns surfacing a problem and then providing one another with possible solutions. Given how lonely this journey can really be, it was helpful hearing from others how their situations were similar and/or how they recommended moving forward.” - Cohort 1 New School Leader

“I feel like I have a network of people to go to. I don’t feel alone in this challenging work. This energizes me.” - Cohort 1 New School Leader

Some schools plan for the former leader to provide transition support - either as a continuing employee or on an as needed basis. This can be a delicate situation - for each of the leaders as well as the school community. It is important that you allow your new leader to drive this decision - and not any lingering loyalty to the departing leader. Remember, your commitment is to the school and the students; you need to ensure your new leader is able to step into their new role in a way that clearly signals they are in charge.

Some schools may also hire a leadership coach. Leadership coaches can provide new leaders a safe and confidential space to process the challenges and dilemmas that inevitably arise in a leadership transition, while building the leader’s capacity to address those dilemmas going forward. Leadership coaches may also be able to conduct a 60 or 90 day “evaluation” to give the new leader feedback on how they are doing so they can course correct as needed. Leaders should be actively involved in selecting their coach. Also, the reporting relationship between the coach and the Board should be clear. For example, if the space is indeed confidential, the leader should not fear that the coach will tattle to the Board chair about how they are feeling.

“Consider outside mentorship, as well. The board may be able to mentor your new leader, but your leader may appreciate support finding mentors that they won’t ultimately report to, as well.” - Board Chair

Build the Board/School Leader Relationship

One of the most important factors in whether the school leader is successful is their relationship with the school board. This relationship is the backbone of good governance. It must be a relationship based on mutual trust, candid and honest feedback, strategic input, proactive discussion of challenges, support and recognition in both directions, and strong accountability and oversight. It is a complex and multifaceted relationship: the board must collaborate with the school leader, sustain mutual trust and open communication, support in dealing with challenges, recognize and reward excellent performance, evaluate them each year, provide constructive feedback and opportunities for growth, and ultimately hold them accountable.

Throughout this transition, you are building your trust in the new leader as they build their trust in you. You will want to make sure you are supporting them without directing them. With that in mind, create a process for checking in to support open dialogue and transparent expectations. Be open to a different working relationship with your new leader than the one you had with the previous leader - your new leader's needs and style will be different, and a trusting relationship needs to meet the needs of both parties!

You will want to work with your leader to develop goals and a timeline for the transition. For example, a first year goal may be a one-on-one meeting with each Board member (breakfast/coffee/lunch). Use those transition goals as the basis for regular check-ins. (You might also consider using the transition goals as performance goals for the leader in their first year.) Allow your leader to drive those meetings while listening for areas where your leader may need more information or guidance. As much as possible, remember that you hired this leader to lead; maintain the appropriate line between governance and management responsibilities. Make sure you create the space for the leader to step into their new role. At the same time, it is important to create this space by tying goals and performance criteria to the transition plan activities. This allows the community to see the connection between their feedback and the goals being developed and tracked. Such connection should also help provide a distinction for the Board between management and operations.

While it is important to have clear goals for the transition plan and clear performance criteria, it is also important to be flexible should unforeseen events arise that shift your leader's focus. No doubt, COVID-19 dramatically impacted the transition plan goals for many a new leader!

“Set goals! Make sure those goals align with the school’s strategic plan. Coach towards those goals. Use those goals to structure your check-ins with your new leader.” - Executive Search Consultant

No doubt, the board/School Leader relationship is critical to get right. There are many resources out there to support your board at this stage, such as MCPSA's [Webinar](#) on School Leader Collaboration, Supervision, and Evaluation which provides context, strategies, advice, and tools to help boards build, nurture, and strengthen this relationship.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I talk to my leader about creating a transition plan without them believing we are planning to kick them out? This feels like a touchy subject.

Yes, this can be a touchy subject. And it can be especially touchy if you don't already have a trusting relationship built with your school leader. However, don't let that stop you from taking the steps to safeguard the future of your school.

When raising the topic, be sure to let your leader know this isn't personal, but your responsibility as a board is to the school and ensuring its sustainability. You want your leader to stay in their position, but you also know that life happens - and at some point, they will step down. You want to be prepared for that day and make sure that systems are in place so ultimately the school continues to be successful. You may also stress with your leader that you would expect she does the same thing with her direct reports who hold critical leadership positions.

You may also want to work this through a board committee, so it doesn't seem as though it is coming from just one person. You can also cite charter public school board experts, such as [Board on Track](#) or [Education Board Partners](#), who recommend succession planning as best practice.

Be especially careful with leaders who are in the retirement age so that the school does not get caught up in age discrimination accusations. However, if transition planning conversations are a common practice for multiple key positions within the organization - e.g., the Principal, Business Manager/CFO, etc), it will be much less likely to be assumed that age discrimination is at play.

The sooner you begin this work, the sooner you can make it the norm in your school community - and it will feel less personal for your leader.

We need to update our strategic plan. Should we do that before we hire a new leader or after?

This is a great question - and one that different boards choose to handle differently. Some boards play more active roles in strategic planning - and will want to make sure they hire a leader who will deliver on the strategic plan that they have crafted. Other boards like to wait for a new leader to arrive to drive the strategic planning process - seeing it as an opportunity for a new leader to bring new ideas to the school and develop a deep connection to the outcome of a strategic plan, as well as build relationships with stakeholders through the process.

There are risks involved with either approach. A new leader may not feel as strong a commitment to a plan that they were not involved in creating. Or, a new leader may not be in a

position to truly drive the creation of a new strategic plan while they are getting acclimated to the job - you may be without an updated plan for a year or more. You will want to engage the board in determining what you believe is right for your organization, at this time.

If you do choose to update your strategic plan before hiring a new leader, that plan should drive the selection of the leader and the process should ensure that the new leader has the skills in place to successfully implement that plan.

How often should we think about updating or refreshing our succession plan?

Once you create a succession plan, you will want to update it at least once a year. It is important to update your succession plan as personnel change and job descriptions evolve. You may want to include two conversations in each annual review: 1) updates to the succession plan and 2) a check-in on your leader's expected timeline at the school. By building it into a regular process, your leader will come to understand it is not personal to their leadership but about the organization's stability.

Who maintains the succession plan? Where does it actually live?

Your School Leader should maintain the succession plan, as the School Leader is the one responsible for regularly updating much of it. The document itself should be kept with other important board documents in a centralized location for board members to access.

Should our board try to build or hire leaders who match our student demographics?

In general, yes. It is important for schools to have employees and leaders whose lived experience allows them to understand and relate to their students and families. However, that is only one aspect of the skills and characteristics that a board might consider when selecting the right new leader. How your board prioritizes the skills and characteristics needed in your new leader will depend on your assessment of your school's strengths and areas for growth. At a minimum, you will want a leader who has demonstrated commitment to and skills in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

Of course, in a perfect world your leader would be able to have all of the skills you need for this stage of your school's growth and be able to relate deeply to the majority of the members of the school community - no prioritization needed. Many schools find ways to develop future leaders whose demographics match their own students so when a new leader is needed, one is ready with the necessary skills.

Additionally, leaders are most successful when they have a trusting relationship with their board. As you ask yourself about the importance of your leader's demographic characteristics, you should also ask about your own board's make-up and ensure that your board has developed their own skills in DEI and represents the demographics of the school families as well.

What can we do to attract a more diverse candidate pool?

First of all, start your hiring process early. The early bird catches the worm! Many schools are working to hire diverse leaders; you don't want them to beat you to the punch.

During the hiring process, make sure that you eliminate bias as much as possible. Train hiring managers in anti-bias practices and ensure that the application process is equitable and fair. Build a diverse hiring team who can support the process and bring new perspectives to each step. For example, a diverse hiring team may help expand where you think to source candidates which, in turn, can expand the diversity of your pool.

If your search process attracts a limited number of diverse candidates, and you have identified diversity as a priority for your candidate, your board may want to consider whether you should suspend the search, regroup, and start again with different strategies. You may want to consult a diversity consultant who can advise you on other strategies to employ. Doing so may require that you install an interim leader and begin anew, early in the next school year.

No matter what, however, building a diverse and equitable team does not end with hiring. In fact, it is very difficult to do if the school's culture itself does not support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). (Or can just lead to rapid turnover of diverse personnel.) Ensure that your team - the Board and staff - get training in DEI and build the institutional policies and systems that support equity across your organization. Please see [these resources](#) if you are interested. Understand that building a diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization is an on-going process - not one that can be accomplished in a year or two.

Appendices

Appendix A: School Leader Succession and Transition Plans Examples

- [Christa McAuliffe Charter Public School Succession Plan](#)
- [Christa McAuliffe Charter Public School Emergency Transition Plan](#)
- [Lawrence Family Development Charter Public School Succession Plan](#)
- [Marblehead Community Charter Public School Succession Plan](#)
- [Neighborhood House Charter Public School Succession Plan](#)
- [Neighborhood House Charter Public School Transition Plan](#)
- [Sizer, A North Central Charter Essential School Succession Plan](#)

Appendix B: Succession Planning Resources

- [Succession Planning Webinar Recording](#) and [Slides](#) (Education Board Partners)
- [Succession Planning Checklist](#) (Education Board Partners)
- [Succession Planning FAQs](#) (Education Board Partners)
- [Creating An Effective School Leader Job Description](#)
- [Succession Planning: Creating a Plan](#)
- [Information and Contact Inventory Template](#) (Marblehead Community Charter Public School)
- [Succession Planning and Cross Training](#) (Christa McAuliffe Charter Public School)
- [Executive Director - Year At A Glance Example](#) (Christa McAuliffe Charter Public School)
- [District Administration.com Article on the Importance of Succession Planning](#)
- [Departure Announcement Example 1](#)
- [Departure Announcement Example 2](#)

Appendix C: Search Process Resources

- [Marblehead Community Charter Public School](#)
- [Martha's Vineyard Charter Public School](#)
- [Salem Academy Charter Public School](#)

Appendix D: School Leader Job Description Examples

- [Abby Kelley Foster Charter Public School](#)
- [City on a Hill Charter Public School](#)
- [Four Rivers Charter Public School](#)
- [Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School](#)

- [River Valley Charter Public School](#)
- [Salem Academy Charter Public School](#)
- [Springfield Prep Charter Public School](#)
- [Sample Charter CEO Job Description \(BoardonTrack\)](#)

Appendix E: School Leader Interview Process Resources

- Marblehead Community Charter Public School
 - a. [Interview Rating Sheet](#) Example 1
 - b. [Interview Rating Sheet](#) Example 2
 - c. [Interview Questions Final Round Example](#)
 - d. [Performance Task Example](#)
- Berkshire Arts & Technology Charter Public School
 - a. [Search Process and Timeline](#)
 - b. [Search Responsibilities](#)

Appendix F: Best Practices in Hiring High-Quality, Diverse Staff

- [EdFuel Recommendations](#)

Appendix G: List of School Leader Search Firms and Sample RFPs

- [School Leader Search Firms](#)
- [RFP Example - Foxborough Regional Charter Public School](#)
- [RFP Example - Christa McAuliffe Charter Public School](#)

Appendix H: MCPSA New Charter Leader Program Overview

- [MCPSA New Charter Leader Program Overview](#)

Appendix I: Charter Public School Leader Collaboration, Supervision, and Evaluation

- [Webinar Recording](#) (click download)
- [Presentation](#)
- Access tools and guidelines on the following topics (and more) in the [Board Resources LiveBinder](#) (**PASSWORD: MCPSA**)
 - a. Governance and Management
 - b. Goal Setting
 - c. Dashboards
 - d. Board Meetings

- e. Stakeholder Engagement
- f. Charter School Leader Evaluation Tool

Appendix J: Recommended Books & Reports

- The Nonprofit Leadership and Transition Guide, Tom Adams. Jossey-Bass. 2010.
- You're Leaving? Succession and Sustainability in Charter Schools, Christine Campbell. National Charter School Research Project. Center on Reinventing Public Education. University of Washington. 2010.
- Chief Executive Succession Planning, Second Edition, Nancy R. Axelrod, BoardSource. 2010.
- Entry: The Hiring, Start-Up and Supervision of Administrators, Barry C. Jentz. McGraw-Hill. 1982.

Appendix K: Who at MCPSA should I contact with questions?

- Lina Musayev, lmusayev@masscharterschools.com