



California Charter
Schools Association

What I Wish I Had Known

Alice Miller, CCSA

Penny Schwinn, Capitol Collegiate Academy

Kate Nicol, Vincent Academy

Steven Holguin Charter School Management Corp



California Charter
Schools Association

Introductions

- Alice Miller – CCSA
- Penny Schwinn – Capitol Collegiate Academy
- Kate Nicol – Vincent Academy
- Steven Holguin – Charter School Management Corporation



California Charter
Schools Association

Early Financial Warnings

- A misunderstanding of cash flow or how growth affects cash flow (an item I encountered as the state's first direct funded charter)
- 86% of all charters who close do so because of fiscal problems and issues
- Cash flow, especially with deferrals and mid year budget cuts



California Charter
Schools Association

Lack of Planning

- Lots of issues including:
- Not asking all of the right questions on admission forms which you need for state reporting (I left off items I needed to fill out my first CBEDS report)
- Lack of training on conducting a CELDT test – must be completed by October 31st
- Insufficient time to get a DOJ account for fingerprinting and back ground checks
- Lack of key board policies (there are a slew of them you need!)
- Idealistic expectations from families and staff – then the harsh reality we deal with real people! Policies needed early
- Facilities, SIS, HR Forms, testing,



California Charter
Schools Association

Selling the Vision vs. Implementing the Vision

- Mission alignment of staff
- Strong, clear, assertive orientation for parents
- Go above and beyond with your authorizer (you're new – you need to build trust)
- Note: Sometimes people buy the vision, but it's harder when push comes to shove. Be ready to stand behind your model, even when it would be easier to make exceptions



California Charter
Schools Association

Organization: Not You

- As a school leader and founder, you likely have a strong organization system with a clear vision of what needs to be done and when
- In hiring people for ***start-up*** and not ***sustaining*** roles, they will likely not have the same understanding of what needs to be done
- You also need to support staff ability to ***execute*** on the expectation
- HIGHLIGHT ROLES: New teachers and people who need to create their roles



California Charter
Schools Association

Plug and Play

- Best practices are just that – they are NOT things that can be immediately dragged onto another site
- It is important to ***translate*** best practices to fit into your model, otherwise it will feel disjointed for staff and families



California Charter
Schools Association

Death By 1,000 Papercuts

- You've likely got the big rocks covered, but what are the smaller things that you could miss that will lead to BIG headaches:
 - Fingerprinting at DOJ
 - CELDT Testing
 - Server
 - School Events – field trips, picture day, Back to School Night,
 - Drills – earthquake, fire, etc.
 - Capacity: how is TIME, not just responsibility being divided up



Loans? No Thank You.

- It's not just that money comes late, it's also that it can change throughout the year
- Budget for a reserve of 10-15% to be safe
- Think critically about whether an expenditure is critical to your mission – are the staff team shirts really necessary?
- Know the little stuff – how much paper will you use? How much is it? How will that impact paper and copier costs?



Talent

- Back up your hiring plan by two months and backwards plan to create concrete hiring benchmarks
- Hire from a systems perspective. Who do you need to round out your team? What sub groups need representation at the school?
- In the hiring process, emphasize the challenges incoming staff are likely to face. Share cautionary tales and gauge reactions.
- Teachers are key, but support staff are also critical, so don't skimp in that hiring process.
- Think through HR policies carefully because while they are technically easy to change, those changes can easily cause big upset.
- Find a way to financially recognize your founding staff. It will come in handy when you hit yet another "start-up glitch."



California Charter
Schools Association

Money Matters

- Fundraise early-tap individuals who have a passion or at least an interest in seeing your school get off the ground and thrive. Create an engaging narrative around your school and build a bastion of supporters.
- Create a discretionary lines for ED/HOS/Board- you will be figuring some things out as you go along, nice not to be totally strapped and able to dole out goodies.
- Look for pilot opportunities that will enhance your program and get you in free of charge.



California Charter
Schools Association

Facilities

Expect challenges in this arena and set aside lots of time to work through the issues that arise

If you are not a good negotiator, make sure there is someone on your team who can take this on.

Start early in forging the relationships that are going to land you a permanent facility solution. Before you open your doors is not too early!

If P39...Board Members, District Facilities Staff

If Commercial Lease...Business community, chamber

If Facilities Construction...Brick and Mortar funders,
Partner Organizations



California Charter
Schools Association

Governance

- Arrange for PD for the Board-third party perspective is helpful.
- Set clear and simple expectations for Board members and have job descriptions
- Build a framework for the Board's work over the course of the first 3-5 years that helps get into more strategic realms
- Do not undersell the responsibilities of working on your Board-better to have fewer strong members than a large number of uncommitted members
- CCSA free workshops and trainings annually



California Charter
Schools Association

Developing School Community

- Set clear culture expectations and communicate them from the very first time you meet prospective families
- Keep in contact with prospective families or new enrollees. Make them feel like they are already at the school!
- Find allies early on in your parent body whose participation in the life of the school exemplifies what you are shooting for and then elevate their profile within the community.
- Find creative ways to bring fringe members into the community.
- Create a body that looks at what's working and what's not with the expectation that start-ups need fine-tuning.

Dealing with your budget

- Plan your cashflow and spending as if EVERY apportionment is going to be 1-2 months late.
- Plan for a \$100k-\$200k fund carryover from year to year – actual carryover after unexpected expenditures could be \$40-\$50k
- Do not continuously adjust your budget so your YTD will match... As long as you do have the funding to cover expenses, do not instantly increase line items. Variance is good to see when budgeting for next year.
- Financial or cashflow assistance is not politics or religion, it's ok to talk about them! If you need ask EVERYONE for their input... CCSA, your backoffice, other charter leaders... The more info you have you the more power you have in your negotiations



Facilities

- If leasing a building, think of every expense possible and negotiate everything.
- Permits can take longer than you think! Plan ahead.
- Do not get into a lease that is financially impossible to get out of if you need to move.
- Share with the landlord your apportionment schedule and discuss rent payment options
- Make sure it is clear who is responsible for which costs... AC, roof, fire sprinklers, electricity, plumbing, etc.
- Tenant improvements above allowance can be built into the lease and paid off over a year or two, rather than all up front... Especially good if you are SB740 eligible.
- Make sure you have a facility plan for future years if growth occurs...
- Don't forget to file tax exemption forms with County!!! Negotiate rent reduction to reflect that exemption.



California Charter
Schools Association

Business Service Providers

- Rates for services are negotiable... Even if you really like the company that has been helping in approval, get quotes from other companies.
- If be requested to sign a multiyear contract, there should be a HUGE benefit to the school for doing so.... Decreased rate, additional services, etc.
- Find out what your penalties will should you want to cancel early or move to another company?
- Ask, ask, ask! Better to “burden” your company with an abundance of questions than not have all the answers or miss something.
- Ask for donations! They are a vendor and are being paid a substantial amount. If you are having a fundraiser make sure you ask ALL of your vendors.

Hiring the right teachers

- Take a deep look into what you view will be the most challenging or unfamiliar aspects about working at your school.... Longer day, year, performance expectations, school involvement etc.....
- Communicate those “challenges” from the very beginning to potential teachers, it may weed out the weak ones...
- Establish criteria in advance for school culture and professional expectations; introduce them in the first interview.....
- Talk to other charter leaders who may have teachers they'd love to hire but have no space for....
- Review at-will employee agreement in detail; ask teachers what their expectations are based on their previous experience



California Charter
Schools Association

Effective School Governance

- Make sure your board understands the culture and vision you are trying to create. Don't add new members who aren't fully committed to your vision, just because they are high profile or can fundraise.
- When possible, get an attorney on the board because it get you free basic "legal insight"
- Make sure your board knows what you are looking at as a school leader.... Cash on hand, student data, district relations, etc.... It'll help them understand your job and will help them lead based on similar priorities.
- Do not tolerate uninvolved or lack of commitment
- Push them like you would your staff... to learn, to perform, to give, etc..



California Charter
Schools Association

Creating School Culture

- Expect initial parent pushback on some policies that may be different from what the district does. Create your policies and culture and stick with them. Waver early and they'll never set in.
- Make sure your teachers are abiding by those same policies and culture and hold them accountable if not.
- Commit significant time in the beginning of every year to discuss goals, expectations, rules, and policies with parents and students
- As school leader, think almost daily what are you doing to assure the school culture is being followed consistently.....



California Charter
Schools Association

Professional Development of You

- Participate in ED/Principal roundtables with other charter school principals... If they are not happening, start one.
- Find a mentor.... Meet regularly (monthly, bi-monthly), talk about school culture, staff development, parent issues, and big picture stuff... Do not make it a whine session.
- To prevent burn-out take a personal day when needed. If you feel your school cannot operate without you being there, then you are failing as a leader.
- If you are not working to constantly improve yourself and your abilities as a charter school leader and an overall leader, then you cannot expect the same out of your staff.
- Find ways that you staff can hold you accountable for your own development.

Enrollment & Outreach

- If possible, OVER ENROLL by at least 10%. You'll have no-shows, kids that move, kids that hate your program, parents that hate you, and quick transfers...
- Start recruiting before you are approved and aggressively the day after you're approved.
- Create a "sense of urgency" about why they need to enroll in your school..... Spots are going fast, don't miss out, beat the lottery, etc....
- Build the longest possible waitlists. Keep recruiting after you think you're full.



California Charter
Schools Association

Contact Information

- Alice Miller amiller@calcharters.org
- Steven Holguin sholguin@csmci.com
- Kate Nicol knicol@vincentacademy.org
- Penny Schwinn pschwinn@capitolcollegiate.org