THE DEATH SPIRAL
How Charter Schools Can Anticipate it AND Avoid It

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What does a “death spiral” look like in a charter school, and what can be done to avoid it?

Objectives:
- To examine the factors that make a school vulnerable.
- To understand how schools can mitigate those vulnerabilities.
What is the Death Spiral?

A Circumstance or Cause

Failure to Meet Goals or Milestones

Impact Resulting in Further Failure
What does this look like in a Charter School?

An issue, an event, a mistake, or simply a lack of focus

Failure to meet academic, staffing, organizational, funding, or enrollment goals

Loss of Enrollment

Program cuts, loss of staff, and institutional memory

Loss of Funding

Loss of Enrollment

Loss of Funding
Reasons for Closures

- Mixed: 63%
- Other: 21%
- Academic Operational: 11%
- Governance and Finance: 5%
## How does a Death Spiral Start?

**Combination of a situation and a trigger**

**Examples:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>Trigger</th>
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<td>Lack of focus on academic goals of the school</td>
<td>Poor performance on state standardized testing</td>
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<td>Weak leadership and lack of professional culture</td>
<td>Low morale, high turnover, loss of institutional memory</td>
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<td>Inexperienced board or lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities</td>
<td>Ineffective financial management and fundraising</td>
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<td>Rapid expansion without demonstrated success</td>
<td>Enrollment targets not met</td>
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Common Traits in “Death Spiral Schools”

- Student performance/educational quality never great
- Enrollment declined as years passed
- Declining enrollment caused insurmountable financial challenges
- Weak governance
What factors perpetuate a Death Spiral?

- Lack of experience or training
- Lack of communication
- Lack of distributed or shared leadership (over-dependence on 1 or 2 individuals)
- Poor planning
- Lack of sufficient funding
- Lack of focus
What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- Train
- Communicate
- Anticipate
- Put systems in place
Train

- Board members
- Administrators
- Business managers
- Staff members
- Parents and Stakeholders
Guiding Principles for Training

- Network with other charter schools and charter school leaders.
- Attend a variety of trainings and send a variety of stakeholders.
- Model continuous improvement.
Board Best Practices

- Model quality and needs-based professional development.
- Secure strong relationships within the school and with outside agencies.
- Understand legislative and legal issues that affect charter schools.
What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- Train
- Communicate
- Anticipate
- Put systems in place
Communicate

- Internal and External Stakeholders
- Systems for communicating
  - Board member ↔ Board member
  - Board ↔ Administration
  - Board ↔ Stakeholders
- Board documents
- Strategic plans
Guiding Principles for Communication

- Set high expectations.
- Be Professional.
- Be Transparent.
- Be Proactive.
Board Best Practices

- Promote the vision and mission of the school.
- Develop and make available all appropriate board documents.
- Adopt policies in alignment with state laws, state rules, and district policies (unless waived).
- Develop proactive communication systems.
What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- Train
- Communicate
- Anticipate
- Put systems in place
Anticipate

- Plan proactively (have a Plan “B”...and “C”)
- Anticipate potential problems
- Progress monitor
- Analyze data and trends
- Prepare in advance for emergencies
Guiding Principles for Anticipating

- Use dashboards to regularly monitor progress.
- Budget conservatively.
- Use accountability structures to guide decision making.
- Make honest assessments.
- Don’t ignore the red flags.
Board Best Practices

- Engage in strategic planning.
- Progress monitor academic programs.
- Guide program assessment and renewal processes.
- Monitor and evaluate financial operations.
- Secure adequate resources for programming.
What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- Train
- Communicate
- Anticipate
- Put systems in place
Put Systems in Place

- Avoid mistakes in the first place
- Prevent a slippery slope
- Use an accountability framework
  - For academics
  - For finance
  - For governance
Guiding Principles for putting systems in place

- Distribute leadership.
- Build capacity within the system.
- Document decision-making to solidify institutional memory.
- Focus the work of the board.
- Establish systems that outlive the skills of individuals.
Board Best Practices

- Hire, retain, support, and evaluate the school administrator.
- Develop and use effective committees.
- Develop accountability structures, and rely on checks and balances.
- Develop and document the organizational structure of the board and school.
The warning signs are there... can we recover once in a Death Spiral?

YES!

- Requires honest evaluation and willingness to change.
- Must put what is best for children ahead of what is best for adults.
- Reach out and get assistance.
Essential Question & Objectives

What does a “death spiral” look like in a charter school, and what can be done to avoid it?

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Questions?