CORE RESOURCE: CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICANT INTERVIEWER GUIDANCE

Table of Contents

About NACSA

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is dedicated to improving the quality of public education by improving the performance of charter school authorizers. NACSA is the oldest national organization devoted exclusively to strengthening charter schools by developing outstanding authorizers and is the trusted resource and innovative leader working with public officials and education leaders to increase the number of high-quality charter schools in cities and states across the nation. NACSA provides training, consulting, and policy guidance to authorizers and education leaders interested in increasing the number of high-quality schools and improving student outcomes.

About NACSA's Knowledge Core

NACSA's Knowledge Core is a new interactive web-based knowledge and learning portal designed to serve the professional needs of both novice and experienced charter school authorizers in carrying out their complex work. From the basics of authorizing to advanced topics, NACSA's Knowledge Core provides a rich array of core authorizing resources, training, guidance, practical tools, and professional networking opportunities to deepen NACSA members' knowledge and help them meet NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter Authorizing*. NACSA's Knowledge Core includes short interactive courses and self-paced, multimedia learning modules; easy-to-customize templates, protocols, and policies; a dashboard to track individual learning progress; and a discussion forum and searchable peer network to facilitate knowledge sharing among members.

Introduction

The following guidance explains the authorizer's approach to conducting interviews of charter school applicants. It also provides guidance for interviewers on how to prepare for and conduct fair and rigorous interviews.

Purpose of the Charter School Applicant Interview

Well-structured, face-to-face interviews help the authorizer evaluate whether an application meets the criteria for approval and the likelihood that it will lead to a high quality school. When they leave the interview, interviewers should be able to respond to the following questions and demonstrate a sound basis for their conclusions:

Is the proposed educational plan sound for the students who will be enrolled in the school?

Is the application's description of the required elements reasonably comprehensive?

Are the applicants likely to implement the proposed program successfully?

Interviews should be purposeful and focused. The interviewers should proceed with a clear idea of what they still need to learn about the applicants and the plan for getting this information. They should design questions to *clarify* and *verify* information presented in the application.

An interview will often reinforce impressions and conclusions about the application but sometimes will change the interviewers' assessment dramatically. On the one hand, an interview might reveal significant weaknesses that were not apparent on paper. On the other hand, the applicants' ability to clarify ambiguities and fill in gaps in the application could inspire confidence in the likelihood of success.

Scheduling and Process

The interview will take place after formal submission of the application. Authorizer staff and external evaluators will complete an initial evaluation of all applications and will invite the applicants to participate in an interview. Applicants will be notified of their interview date and time. Based on the quality of the applicant's proposal and the applicant interview, the authorizer will make recommendations to the authorizer's governing board regarding each application.

Length

Interviews will generally be up to ninety minutes in length. Ninety minutes is adequate time to address key issues; however, the time inevitably goes quickly. Therefore, it is important for all participants to cooperate in managing the process.

Participation

Interviewers: The interview team will be a combination of authorizer staff and external experts. The authorizer finds that outside perspectives and expertise often complement the experience and skills of authorizer staff.

There is no fixed number of people for a well-constructed interview team. It is important that the interviewers be able to question the applicants regarding all major areas of the application (educational plan, organizational capacity, governance, finances, etc.) and assess the responses critically. The team will be small enough that all members can participate and work together in a coordinated and efficient manner.

Applicants: The applicant will have substantial discretion to determine both how many and which individuals will best represent the proposed school. The applicant group should reflect the leadership of the charter school effort yet be small enough that each person will contribute substantively.

The authorizer will provide applicant groups specific guidance designed to help each group determine which representatives should participate.

Notice to Applicants

In advance of the interview, the authorizer will provide applicants with written process information, which will let applicants know what the authorizer expects from them and what they can expect. At a minimum, it will include the following information:

• **Logistics**: The date, location, and start and end times for the interview

• **Participation**: Who is expected to participate and who is permitted to participate

• **Process**: An outline of the interview process

Interview Scope

Interviewers will work from the framework for interview structure described in this document Within this framework, interviewers have broad discretion to pursue the topics and questions that they consider to be of particular importance. Interviews are not scripted, and applicants should be prepared to discuss all aspects of an application, including the educational plan, organizational plan, and financial plan.

Conducting the Interview: Guidance for Charter School Interview Teams

Interviews of charter school applicants are a critical component of evaluating the quality of each applicant's plan, as well as the capacity to bring the plan to fruition. An interview with applicants often will reinforce your impressions of the paper application but sometimes will change your assessment dramatically. It is possible that an interview will reveal significant weaknesses that were not apparent on paper. On the other hand, the applicants' ability to answer your remaining questions or address potential gaps can demonstrate capacity that was not apparent on paper.

After reading the application, you are likely to have both tentative conclusions and additional questions. The interview provides an opportunity to test your preliminary conclusions and to answer your remaining questions. Interviews should be purposeful and focused. Seek to clarify and verify the information presented in the application. The following advice is designed to help interview teams conduct interviews that are fair and effective.

Keep in mind, also, that the interview is a major interface moment between the applicant group and authorizer. As the "face" of the authorizer, we trust that you will conduct yourself with graciousness, professionalism, and dignity.

Prior to the Interview

Do Your Homework

Conducting an effective interview requires that all panel members have read the application with a critical eye, have identified additional information needed to make a thorough assessment of the application, and have formed questions aimed at eliciting that information.

Identify the Interview Leader

The team lead will generally be responsible for managing the tasks outlined in this guidance. Specific interview responsibilities may include the following:

• Opening the interview and facilitating introductions

• Providing general guidance or "ground rules"

• Keeping participants on track with regard to content, sequence, and time during the interview

• Moderating the dialogue

• Closing the interview

Orient All Interview Team Members

It is important to orient the interview team to the purposes and structure of the interview, particularly where the team will include outside consultants or community members. All interviewers should be familiar with the general plan for the interview and be prepared to contribute productively.

Prepare and Prioritize Questions and Key Topics

It is important to decide the primary lines of inquiry as a team. What are the two or three most important issues to address with the applicants? The interview is the time to ask questions that are essential to your assessment of whether the application meets the criteria and will ultimately lead to a high quality school. If you are coming in with serious concerns about specific aspects of the plan, your priority should be to give applicants a chance to address those concerns. You should use the Interview Preparation Form (Exhibit A) to aggregate, discuss, and prioritize questions for the interview.

Decide the Interview Process

Will interviewers take turns asking questions? Will certain interviewers take the lead on asking questions on particular topics? There is no single "right" way to structure the process. You should develop a common understanding of what the process should look like for this interview.

Opening the Interview

The team lead will generally open the interview with introductions and an overview of the interview process. You may use the Interview Introduction Script (Exhibit B) as an outline of how to open the interview. Be sure to include the following components.

Recognize the Applicants

The applicant team has likely devoted hundreds of hours to developing the application. Some will have worked on the plan for a year or more before submitting it to the Department. It is important to acknowledge the team's efforts and to appreciate their commitment to improving education.

Facilitate Introductions

State the purpose of the interview; describe the process; and have each interviewer state his or her name, title, and – if the team includes outside interviewers – organizational affiliation.

Explain the Timeframe, Structure, and Ground Rules for the Interview

Applicants should know what to expect so they can respond to questions efficiently. The following are examples of "ground rules":

• Designate a primary respondent for each question.

(The primary respondent may vary depending on the topic.)

• Expect to spend two to three minutes on the initial response to a question, allowing time for follow-up.

• Feel free to ask for clarification.

During the Interview

The team lead should ensure the following:

Follow the Planned Interview Structure

The authorizer will provide you and the applicants with an outline of the interview structure. You should make every effort to conduct the interview according to this structure, especially where the authorizer has indicated that the applicants will have an opportunity to present or ask questions.

A typical interview will proceed roughly as follows:

Topic	Time Allotted
Introduction and Overview	5-10 minutes
Applicant Introductions and Opening Statement	5-10 minutes
Questions and Discussion	60-70 minutes
Review of Next Steps and Opportunity for Applicant Questions	10 minutes

Ask Standard and Application-Specific Questions

The authorizer will provide you and the applicants with an outline of the interview structure. You should make every effort to conduct the interview according to this structure, especially where the authorizer has indicated that the applicants will have an opportunity to present or ask questions.

Interviews typically include a combination of (1) standard questions that the interview team asks all applicants and (2) application-specific questions prompted by questions or concerns that the application raises.

Following are examples of standard questions that interviewers may find useful to ask in the course of an interview:

Who hires and fires the Principal?

During the school year, how will the Principal and governing board know if children are meeting the school's goals for learning?

Who will monitor the school's finances on a regular basis and how?

How, and for what purpose, will teachers be evaluated?

Exhibit C presents a lengthier list of sample interview questions grouped by category. You should not expect to ask all or even most of the questions on the list. Stock questions will help start the conversation. The most important questions are the ones you will ask in follow-up that are specific to the application and the people in front of you.

Connect Questions to Specifics in the Application

Your questions should demonstrate that you have thoughtfully read the application. Interview questions should seek clarification or elaboration on the content of the application. For example:

In the Community Engagement section of your Educational Plan, your application mentions significant contributions in pro bono support and volunteer services.

How will volunteers, especially those who will have direct contact with students, be selected and evaluated? or Who will organize and supervise volunteer or pro-bono staffed programs?

Generally, ask open-ended questions or seek description. Open-ended questions and requests for description cannot be answered simply by "yes" or "no." They invite explanation and elaboration. For example:

Closed question:

Does the foreign language program you're proposing emphasize conversation in the elementary grades?

Open-ended question:

What does the foreign language program you're planning look like in the elementary grades?

Request for description:

Describe what we might see in a typical foreign language class in the elementary grades.

Consider Using Scenarios

You might think of one or two scenarios that will help you assess the applicants' preparation to deal with practical challenges of running a charter school. Scenarios are a good way to require applicants to test key assumptions.

Examples:

Your application estimates 8% students with disabilities. What will you do if your population of students with disabilities is actually twice that?

In your application, you identify a potential school site that looks promising. What if that building doesn't end up being available?

What will you do if your enrollment, and thus your revenue, is 15% lower than your budget assumes?

There is not a right answer to these questions. Indeed, it would be unrealistic to demand a specific solution. Rather, the responses will help you assess whether the applicants have a sense of how to approach realistic charter school challenges effectively.

Pose Questions to the Group Generally Unless a Question to a Specific Individual is Appropriate

All representatives of the applicant group should have a meaningful opportunity to respond to questions, as appropriate. Unless your question is clearly directed at an individual (e.g., asking a particular director about his / her previous experience), you should allow the applicants to decide how they will structure their responses.

Ask One Question at a Time

Avoid posing compound or multiple questions. Instead, allow a response to the first part of the question, and then pose the second part.

Example:

Use this format:

What aspects of the plan depend on private funding? [Response] How will you adjust the program if you are unable to secure that funding?

Not this format:

What aspects of the plan depend on private funding, and how will you adjust the program if you are unable to secure that funding?

Do Not Let Politeness Limit Rigor

It is imperative that interviewers appropriately assess an applicant's preparation to open and operate a school, even if it means asking difficult questions that make interviewers or the applicant uncomfortable. See Managing Difficult Interview Situations (Exhibit D) for more guidance.

Stick to the Plan and Let the Interview Leader Lead

Each interviewer should monitor his or her own questions in relation to the goals and priorities for the interview, and should support the lead's decisions in managing the process.

Ending the Interview

Close the interview with the following:

Allow Applicants An Opportunity to Ask Questions about the Process

Applicants may have questions about the process that you can answer before you discuss next steps. However, you should not respond to questions about how the application has been rated, and you should not say anything about your assessment of the substance of their application or the interview.

Explain Next Steps

Give the applicants information about timing for application decisions.

Thank the Applicants for Participating

Remember that the applicants have invested a great deal of time and energy in the application and the interview. Remind them that you recognize and appreciate their efforts.

Following the Interview

Immediately following the interview or as soon as possible thereafter the interview team should:

Review Notes, Discuss Impressions, Conclusions, and Remaining Questions

As a team, assess the information gleaned from the interview as well as from the written application. Decide what issues the applicants have or have not satisfactorily addressed and what conclusions you can draw about the applicants' capacity to develop and operate a quality charter school.

Exhibit A: Interview Preparation Form

The primary purposes of the interview are 1) to probe questions or concerns raised by the application; and 2) to evaluate the capacity of the applicant group to successfully implement the plan.

This Interview Preparation Form is designed to help the interview team prepare for and conduct an effective interview. There will probably not be enough time to cover everything that the team would like to address, so it is important to identify priorities and ensure adequate time to address those priorities in depth.

School Name:_____

Critical Issues Summary: (*complete this section only after completing each of the following sections*)

Part & Section	Issue/Concern	Lead Question(s)	App Page Reference

Part 1: School Design

Overall, how would you rate the quality of these sections?

Summary: (*one sentence)*

What are the primary questions that you would like to ask the applicant during the interview?

Part & Section	Issue/Concern	Lead Question(s)	App Page Reference

Part 2: Organizational Plan

Overall, how would you rate the quality of these sections?

Summary: (*one sentence*)

| |
| |

What are the primary questions that you would like to ask the applicant during the interview?

Part & Section	Issue/Concern	Lead Question(s)	App Page Reference

Part 3: Financial Plan

Overall, how would you rate the applicant's capacity to implement successfully the plan as proposed?

Summary: (*one sentence)*

What are the primary questions that you would like to ask the applicant during the interview?

Part & Section	Issue/Concern	Lead Question(s)	App Page Reference

Exhibit B: Interview Introduction Script

Good [morning or afternoon], my name is _____, and I will be serving as the chairperson for your interview.

First, let me congratulate your team for being invited to participate in this process, and thank you for dedicating your time and efforts toward creating a charter school.

As you know, it is a rigorous process to be approved to open a charter school, and in the end, only a few of the original number of applicants will have the opportunity to open a school. We thank you for committing to and engaging in this competitive process.

Please allow me to go over a few details about this interview, then we will allow the interview team to introduce themselves, which will be followed by introductions and an opening statement from your team.

This interview will last up to 90 minutes. We will take 5 to 10 minutes for introductions and an opening statement from your team, approximately 70 minutes on questions regarding your application, and 10 minutes to answer your questions and discuss next steps.

Interviewers have read your application and have developed questions based on the information provided so that we can get both more information and clarifying information today.

We'd like to set a few ground rules for the question portion of the interview. Your team should:

• Designate a primary respondent for each question. (The primary respondent may vary depending on the topic.)

• Expect to spend two to three minutes on the initial response to a question, allowing time for follow-up.

• Feel free to ask for clarification.

We have a number of topics to cover: if we cut you off or otherwise limit your response, it is in the interest of making sure you have a chance to respond to other questions or concerns.

After the interview, the interviewers will make recommendations to the Office of Charter Schools based on your written application and this interview as to whether your team should be considered to open a charter school.

Those recommendations will factor into the final decision of whether to approve your application.

Let's begin with introductions, starting with the interviewers.

[After interviewer introductions] Please introduce your team and, if you would like, give us a brief overview of your vision for the school. Kindly make sure that your introductions include what role you have played in the application process, as well as what role you intend to have if the school is approved.

Exhibit C: Sample Interview Questions

Following is a list of sample interview questions grouped by application section. You will not be able to ask all of these questions in any one interview, nor should you try. Decide which topics are the most important for you to explore, based on the application, and then consider using a few of the questions below to help get the conversation started in those areas. The most effective questions are likely to be ones that are specific to the application and the people in front of you.

Introduction

Introduction	*If approved, what are the biggest challenges you will have between now and opening day?*
	Walk me through what a typical day will look like for a student in the [highest year offered in the first year].
	What are the greatest strengths of the school?
	What do you see as the greatest strengths of your application?

Educational Plan/School Design

Mission and Vision	*What is the school's mission and vision?*
	How will you measure success?
	During the first year, how will the governing body and the Principal know whether the school is doing well?
	After four years, how will the governing body and the Principal know whether the school is doing well?
	What will be the primary characteristics of the school if it is successful?
Student Population	*What do you expect the student population to look like?*
Curriculum and	*How was the curriculum selected?* (if applicable)

Instruction	*What is the plan for selecting (or developing) the curriculum?* *(if applicable)*
	What types of remediation do you expect students to need?
	What is the plan for working with students who are not meeting expectations?
	Who provides tutoring / enrichment?
	When will tutoring happen?
	How will you make ability grouping decisions? How often (and how) will those decisions be re-evaluated?
	How do your proposed goals align with the expected levels of school performance set out by the authorizer?
Special Populations	*What is your plan for working with English Language Learner students?*
	How will you communicate with students and parents whose first language is not English?
	What is your plan for working with students with disabilities?
	How will you ensure that students with disabilities are still learning even if they are in in-school suspension or are suspended?
	How will you approach the sometimes complex issues that accompany students who have an IEP and multiple diagnoses?
Discipline	*What will you do with students who exhaust all options in your discipline plan?*
	How will you make suspension / expulsion decisions?
	How will teachers be trained on the discipline plan?
	What evidence is there that your method of discipline will be effective with your anticipated student population?

	What will you do if there are potential legal consequences for student conduct?
Parent and Community Engagement	*How will you engage the community in your school (and vice versa)?*
	What efforts have you made to build relationships in the community to date?
Recruitment and Marketing	*How will you ensure that students from deprived and disadvantaged families have an opportunity to attend your school?*
	Why would parents want to enroll their students in your school?
	Why would students want to enroll in your school?

Organizational Plan

Governance	*What are the governing body's responsibilities?*
	How will you recruit governing body members to fill identified skill gaps?
	How will you (governing body members) evaluate the Principal?
	What opportunities / avenues will there be for parental involvement and input in the school's governance?
Leadership/Staffing *(Questions can be tailored to staffing information provided)*	*What makes your school's Principal uniquely qualified to lead your school? (if applicable)*
	What are the primary qualifications you are looking for in the _____? (Insert the title of a relevant position, such as Director of Curriculum. This type of question is especially useful where the school expects to have non-traditional administrative positions and roles.)
	What will be the primary responsibilities of the _____? (Insert the title of a relevant position, such as Director of Curriculum. This type of question is especially useful where the school expects to have non-traditional administrative positions and roles.)

	What kinds of teachers do you need to implement this program well?
	What is your plan for recruiting them?
Professional Development	***What type of professional development will you need to do before starting school?***
	What kind of professional development will you provide on an on-going basis?
Teacher Evaluation	***How, and for what purpose, will teachers be evaluated?***
Facilities	***What buildings have you explored or identified?***
	What are your essential building needs?
	What is your ideal building?
	What will be the transportation options to / from your desired location?
Financial Plan	
Startup Costs	***In the first three years, what parts of the budget depend on grants and other supplemental funding?***
Financial Viability	***What is the plan for achieving financial sustainability?***
Financial Capacity	***Who will be responsible for financial systems and management?***
	If it is a management company, how will the board provide oversight? Have the board and management company discussed specific terms of an agreement?
	Who will monitor the school's finances on a regular basis and how?
	[If there are significant costs that are not addressed in the budget, you should ask about these. Common areas are professional development, SPED staffing, and after-school or summer school programs.]

Questions for Existing Operators and Schools Contracting with Education Service Providers

Educational Program Design	***How will your educational program change to serve the local student population?*** *(if applicable)*
	How will those changes impact your_____? *(Insert components of the design that may be impacted, such as budget, staffing, professional development, etc.)*

Exhibit D: Managing Difficult Interview Situations

No matter how well you prepare, there will likely be times when you are uncomfortable during an interview. Often you may feel this way because you have a question or concern that you believe will make the applicants feel uncomfortable or, worse yet, make them feel badly about their plan. This does not entitle you to sacrifice rigor in the name of politeness. It is your task and your responsibility to assess the applicants' preparation to operate a charter school, and fulfilling that responsibility will sometimes create uncomfortable situations. All applicants are entitled to a full opportunity to respond to your concerns. Indeed, if you are not direct with the applicants in identifying and providing them an opportunity to address your concerns, you are doing them a disservice because those concerns may ultimately be a basis for your recommendation.

On the other hand, if a team is clearly unable to provide satisfactory responses, don't prolong the interview unnecessarily. Once you have provided a full and fair opportunity for the applicant to respond to your concerns, thank the team for the hard work that they have put into submitting a proposal and for their commitment to their community.

Following are some situations that are likely to test your skills as an interviewer:

1) The applicants are a passionate group of experienced educators who have little knowledge or awareness of the business side of operating a school.

Guidance: You should ask questions about key aspects of the proposed budget that will test the knowledge and preparation of the applicant group.

Example: What adjustments will you make if enrollment is 10% lower than anticipated?

You can also probe the clarity and soundness of the proposed governance and management structure.

Example: What is your process for hiring the Principal? How will you make the decision?

2) The applicants are longstanding members of the community who feel ownership over the schools and are nostalgic for their own educational experience, but they have little professional experience in education or school operations.

Guidance: Explore the degree to which the applicants have thought through the educational program and the plan.

Example: How did you choose the educational program? Were there other programs that you considered? Why did you settle on [the one proposed]?

Example: Have you identified a Principal? [If so, what are that person's qualifications? If not, what key capacities and experience are you looking for in that person? What are your strategies for finding the right person?]

3) You suspect (or know) that the proposal was written by a consultant who will not have any involvement in the actual operation of the school.

Guidance: If the primary author of the application is in the room, he or she will undoubtedly be responding to most if not all of the questions. Your primary task should be to redirect the conversation so that others must respond. One way is for the team lead to make a global request that the questions be answered primarily, if not exclusively, by people who will be involved in the development and operation of the school going forward.

Example: It is important that we understand the vision for how the school will develop and evolve once it is approved. With that in mind, we ask that those who will be responsible for the school's on-going development and operation be the primary respondents to our questions.

Another strategy is for interviewers to direct questions to particular individual(s).

Example: I would like to have a member of the proposed governing board discuss what you consider the most important qualifications or experiences in selecting the Principal.

4) The responses are substantively inconsistent with the written proposal.

Guidance: You should get to the root of what is causing the contradiction, why the team is proposing the current ideas, and how any changes from the proposal impact the overall school plan. While some applicants may simply be unfamiliar with their own application (see issue 3 above), others may have a thoughtful reason for having made changes to their plan. Ask the rationale for changing the plan, how the change fits within the school's vision, and how it impacts other areas of the plan. Be prepared to refer to a specific section of the application if the applicant does not seem familiar with the issue.

Examples:

What led you to select a different curricular program?

How does the new program align with your school's vision?

How will you modify the professional development plan to align with the changes you have described in the curricular plan?

5) One person from the applicant group dominates the interview and is the only person who seems prepared to respond to any of the questions.

Guidance: As with issue 3, you should redirect the conversation so that others must respond.

Example: What role has each team member played in developing the school design? How will each of you be involved if the school is approved?

In some cases, you may find that other team members are capable of responding but feel that they cannot get a word in edge-wise. If this is the case, you should assess what role the dominant team member will play in the school and who will hold him/her to account.

Example: How will the governing body evaluate the [dominant founder/Principal]? How will members of the applicant team and future school staff have an opportunity to provide input into important decisions? Who is the ultimate decision-maker in the school?

6) The respondents provide the 'wrong' answer in response to a critical question such that you would recommend denial of the application on the basis of that response alone.

Guidance: First and foremost, you must test whether you have understood the response correctly and whether the applicants intended to convey what you heard. Try paraphrasing or repeating back to the applicant what you have heard to test your understanding.

Example: I want to ensure that I understand you correctly. What I hear you saying is that you will not allow students with disabilities to enroll in your school. Is that accurate?

Or check your understanding by asking the question in a different way.

Example: Let me ask a related question, based on the area where you plan to be located, what do you anticipate your likely enrollment of students with disabilities to be?

Or check your understanding by presenting a scenario that presses the point.

Example: I believe you just said that your school will not serve any students with disabilities. What would happen if a student enrolled in your school and was subsequently identified as needing additional supports?

.