

Characteristics of High-Quality Public Charter Schools

Overarching Definition

High quality charter schools improve the public education system for all students by leading with a mission and innovative practices across the school system while promoting a culture of continuous learning.

“Definitions of quality must be open to change and evolution based on information, changing contexts, and new understandings of the nature of education’s challenges. New research — ranging from multinational research to action research at the classroom level — contributes to this redefinition.”

(Defining Quality Education, UNICEF, 2000)

A collection of evidence-based research was used to guide us to identify characteristics of high quality schools. This current definition of high quality is based on this knowledge and practices known thus far.

Charter schools in Hawai‘i have three frameworks that outline the requirements to maintain a contract with the state of Hawai‘i to deliver a high quality educational experience outside of the Department of Education but within the public realm. Charter schools are required to demonstrate fiscal, organizational, and academic accountability policies and practices that lead to effectively and efficiently running a high quality charter school. The charter schools are expected to meet the needs of their students, families, and community while carrying out its statutory responsibility to the state of Hawai‘i.

The Hawai‘i State Public Charter School Commission, as the authorizer, and guided by the three frameworks, has identified characteristics of a high quality charter school. This document represents practices and principles based on a review of the diverse resources of evidence and research currently available.

Organization and Governance Structure

High quality charter schools have a clear mission and vision. Their culture is one of constant growth and innovation. There are systems in place to inform its stakeholders.

A high quality charter school has a governing board of directors responsible for school policy making and oversight.

- There are clearly established governing board and management roles and responsibilities known by all members of school leadership and management.
- Expectations and processes are structured to ensure all parties are executing their role in carrying out the school's mission and vision through established policies and practices.
- Systems are in place to support ongoing, scheduled conversations that engage the school leadership team with its governance bodies.
- Accountability measures, including both evaluations and self-evaluations, are used to gauge progress and effectiveness.
- Metrics are in place that guide both school leadership and the school's governing board and highlight to the public school progress in moving along a continuum of growth and success.
- The school's governing board and management align their work to the mission and vision of the school, and there is visible evidence of the school's mission and vision embedded throughout their work.

High quality governing board of directors demonstrates the following:

- Board meetings are regularly scheduled and are accessible to all stakeholders;
- Agendas clearly identify action and discussion items and include written reports that are accessible to all stakeholders and include dialogue encompassing the school's mission, vision, core operations, identifying areas of strength and areas where improvement or growth is needed;
- Accurate and clear minutes, and other required reporting, are maintained and posted for their stakeholders to access and review, in alignment with HRS 302D-12;
- The governing board is made up of members that reflects their school community;
- Governing board member attendance is consistent, achieving quorum on a regular basis;
- A governing board system of evaluation or reflection that measures its own effectiveness in its role and responsibilities and carrying out the school's mission

and vision is in place and used for continuous improvement.

- A succession and recruitment plan is used to ensure continuity of governance and school leadership
- There is a closing plan in place in the event that the school is not meeting its charter school statutory responsibilities that is accessible to all stakeholders;
- Systemic processes provide stakeholders access to data indicating if the school is on target to meet its mission, vision, and statutory responsibilities.
- The school's data collection system informs the Governing Board in order for the Board to perform their fiduciary oversight and monitoring responsibilities.
- Lines of communication are clearly established to access the governing board.
- Governing board trainings and onboarding is evidenced in board calendar, agenda, and minutes;
- Annual goals for growth are developed collaboratively with clear metrics that measure progress towards goals; and
- Policies and practices, including an annual review of the school leader, all school staff, and faculty, are aligned with the school's mission and vision.

Effective System of Accountability

High quality governing boards and its charter schools are held publicly accountable.

- Each charter school organization has a governing board of directors that is responsible for school policy-making and oversight.
- There is a visible system of internal accountability and monitoring that includes academic, financial, and operational performance expectations.
- Its school community becomes internally accountable—dedicated to working together to accomplish their shared goals, adjust their approach based on results, and respond flexibly and quickly when needed.
- High quality charter schools are able to meet compliance and reporting timelines through an effective system of accountability.

Early Warning System

High quality charter schools have in place an [Early Warning System](#) that includes interrelated indicators of distress or risk in leadership, governance, finance and operations, talent, culture and instruction. There is a systematic way to focus on these potential risk factors and to effectively target interventions to circumvent those risks.

- A data-driven, evidence based approach applies interventions before the school is at risk for failure, and interventions are implemented before students are in danger of failing.
- Charter schools and its system of support, have the tools to identify distress earlier, and in a systematic way, allowing schools to change course and receive support earlier, reducing the impact of school decline on students and communities (National Charter School Resource Center, 2021).

Competent Leadership

Governing boards ensure that there are competent leaders across its charter school system by aligning leadership competencies to the context of its mission and vision of its school.

- High quality charter schools have sustained leadership, a system of leadership development, and a continuous improvement process, whereby strong leadership is evident, and its governing board holds its school leader accountable.
- High quality governing boards conduct regular reviews of their policies, engage in ongoing professional development that pertains to their work as public agents, and follow all applicable ethics guidelines and statutory responsibilities as they pertain to their fiduciary duties as volunteer public servants.
- High quality governing boards actively engage in data analysis, strategic planning, monitoring, and spiral inquiry processes. The governing board reviews and monitors the schoolwide action plan, and provides opportunities for stakeholder input and feedback (Focus on learning. ACS WASC Hawaii public charter school process guide, 2016).
- High quality governing boards have in place a system of early warning indicators that they regularly review and collect in order to ensure the growth and success of the charter school in which they govern. This is done by holding themselves and the school leadership accountable to high standards and expectations (U.S. DOE, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004; National Charter School Resource Center, 2020; National Charter School Resource Center, 2021; Charter asset management, 2018; Focus on learning. ACS WASC Hawaii public charter school process guide, 2016; Ladd, H. & Fiske, E., 2021; Charter schools, school improvement, 2019; NACSA, 2015; NACSA, 2019; Cohodes, S., 2018; Shannon, G., Bylsma, 2007; Miller, T., 2019; Lin, M., 2009).

Sound Financial Management

A key component to high quality charter schools is its ability to properly manage its finances through the responsible and efficient fiscal management of public funds.

Key Practices and Strategies

Key practices and strategies for effective school management of school finances include operating school finances in a transparent manner to develop trust within employees and the community. Transparency must respect certain privacy laws, understanding that as a public agency, the school's records are discoverable. Sharing cash on hand, year-to-date expenditures, and policies in place for procurement are three ways for schools to demonstrate transparency.

- High quality charter schools have dedicated personnel to monitor the inflow and outflow of funds that support the school.
- Leadership and management have established a system of clear policies and practices that employs checks and balances to ensure that effective fiscal rules and regulations are implemented that are allowable and maximizes the best possible use of its resources while minimizing costs (Education Partners Project Foundation for State Legislatures, 1996).
- A sound high quality charter school and its governing board of directors has a system in place to understand the financial state and limitations of the school. Financial reports are shared on a regular basis at governing board meetings to ensure that the governing board is informed with the most current information.
- A sound state finance system promotes predictability and stability of educational revenues and expenditures over time.
- A high quality charter school has sound fiscal leadership practices that:
 - Develop, approve and revise school budgets;
 - Analyze school income and expenditures, ensuring allocations and school plans;
 - Understand fiscal rules and regulations;
 - Establish proper fiscal rules, procedures and systems;
 - Allow the school leader to easily access the current fiscal information of its charter school;
 - Organize fiscal budgeting controls and reporting to monitor school finances; and
 - Hire school accountant/business manager to accurately track and evaluate school finances.
- Schools demonstrating high quality fiscal management have well established systems and processes.

- All staff are aware of these practices.
- Regular external and internal audits of books and records are routinely conducted.
- High quality charter schools ensure a deep level of understanding as to the purpose of an audit and how it can inform the fiscal well being of the organization.
- Monitoring of access to funds is conducted by multiple sources and monitoring of any credit or debit cards is reviewed minimally on a monthly basis.
- High quality charter schools have current knowledge of daily operational funds and how those come together to support long term budgeting plans for sustaining the school in the future.
- Charter schools must meet payroll or face loss of their contract. Sufficient cash-on-hand (90 days minimum per contract) ensures that a school can function should a crisis impede their inflow of cash.
- The school leadership team and Governing Board have in place standing conversations to discuss the financial status of its charter school.
 - High quality charter schools use the financial health framework to monitor the dynamic motion of a school's fiscal health.
 - The school's financial risk is monitored and shared with the governing board monthly to ensure long term sustainability and to head off any negative trends before they become problematic to the functioning of the school.

Academic Performance

Contribution to the Improvement of the Public Education System

High quality charter schools meet market needs, the needs of their community and set high standards for their students. They also demonstrate cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching that produce strong academic results for their students (Shannon, G., Bylsma, 2007).

High quality charter schools provide targeted and innovative support to student populations implementing appropriate services for at risk students.

Leading with a Mission

High quality charter schools lead with a mission consistent across the school program.

- High quality charter schools lead with a mission focused on learning based on student needs, current educational research, and the belief that all students can achieve at high academic levels.
- The mission drives every aspect of the school's instructional system, and reflects the school's freedom to experiment and be creative with organization structure, scheduling, curriculum, and instruction to close student achievement gaps while also challenging students academically.
- A cohesive, aligned curriculum is being used to guide instruction and use of evidence-based practices across all grade levels (U.S. DOE, Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004; Charter asset management, 2018; Charter schools, school improvement, 2019; Focus on learning. ACS WASC Hawaii public charter school process guide, 2016; NACSA, 2019; Shannon, G., Bylsma, 2007; Miller, T., 2019).

Promoting a Culture of Continuous Learning and Improvement

High quality charter schools use continuous learning and improvement plans for student success.

- There is a systemization of assessment for student learning that informs school leaders, staff, faculty, and governing boards on instruction and the impact on student learning.
- Student-focused instructional planning reflects commitment to the school's vision, demonstrates an innovative spirit, and includes strict accountability that all works synchronously to create learning communities embracing a school culture of continuous improvement.
- School-wide goals and performance indicators for student learning are adopted and measured regularly using the spiral inquiry processes.
- Data is used to adjust plans as part of a data-driven culture focused on increasing the quality of student work through prevention and intervention.

Interdependence with Families and the Community

High quality charter schools create a sense of interdependence with families and the community that is connected to.

- Families and the school's community partners are key players that contribute to the vision and mission of the school allowing students to reach their highest potential.
- Families are viewed as strategic partners and are an integral part of the school's improvement planning.

- Student agreements, including but not limited to attendance and behavior expectations, have been adopted, communicated, and implemented with families.
- There is a reciprocal relationship with the school system and its community partners where learning opportunities resonate from all members.
- High quality charter schools are engaged in effective collaborative practices with multi-sector education partners to engage in discussions to share and build upon successful educational practices (National Charter School Resource Center, 2021).

Academic Plans Embrace a System of Accountability

High quality charter schools' academic plans embrace a comprehensive and effective system of accountability that holds all stakeholders publicly accountable.

- There is a system of internal accountability for monitoring systems that includes academic performance expectations.
- School communities are internally accountable—dedicated to working together to accomplish shared goals, and responding flexibly and quickly when needed.
- High Quality charter schools demonstrate school improvement that is steady.
- Leadership prioritizes improvement and is able to communicate its urgency, and monitors short- and long-term goals.
- There is differentiated, targeted support to meet individual needs which use frequent data analysis to inform responses to interventions.

Charter schools have the ability to recruit, hire, develop, retain, and sustain mission-driven highly qualified talent.

- A strong iterative system of growth and improvement (coaching, professional learning system based on staff/faculty evaluations, observations) exists.
- The system ensures equitable access for a diverse population of students.
- High quality charter schools have policies, and practices defining standards for their staff – a no excuses approach (Cohodes, S., 2018).
- There are clearly established performance expectations for all leaders, faculty, and staff.
- In place are practices that include frequent monitoring of learning and teaching, focused professional learning, and a supportive learning environment.
- Professional development opportunities are targeted to faculty and staff performance needs.
- Sustaining and growing talent results in instructional transformation which has the potential to diagnose and respond to student learning needs through rigorous

evidence-based instruction that removes barriers, and provides pathways to learning.

- Clearly present is a culture shift – building a strong school community intensely focused on student learning. Stakeholder input is routinely gathered and used to improve instruction, support, and learning. Visibly present is the engagement of its students and families in pursuing educational goals.

Conclusion

Honoring the diversity of charter schools in Hawai'i, we strive to identify and uphold high quality standards, promoting school autonomy, while protecting student interests and public trust with the ultimate goal of providing high quality educational experiences for all charter school students. These policies and practices inform stakeholders as we strive towards this targeted goal.