

# CHARTER BOARDS 101

AN INTRODUCTION TO CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD SERVICE

# EFFECTIVE CHARTER SCHOOL GOVERNANCE IN A NUTSHELL

- Every public charter school is governed by an independent Board of Trustees
- In many ways the board is the “public” in public charter school.
- As a public board, it is essential that board composition and board practice is done in such a way as to garner the public trust.

The essential ingredients of an exceptional charter school board include:

- Getting “**the right people on the bus**” -- which is a matter of defining who makes for a strong board member and a clear process to identify, screen and recruit the “right” people.
- Clearly **understanding what they have promised to deliver** to their authorizer and developing clear and consistent ways to measure this.
- **Being prepared to govern for what matters most**
  - The academic success of every student
  - Effective oversight of the financial health of the school
  - Support, guidance and evaluation of the school leader focusing on results
- Having the **right structures** to make effective oversight possible
- Demonstrating and implementing a **clear understanding of the difference between governance and management.**

# **Top 10 Characteristics of a Highly Effective Charter School Governing Board**

- 1. Passionate, unwavering belief in the charter school's mission and core values**
- 2. Clarity of collective vision -- where the school is and where it wants to be in the future**
- 3. A firm understanding of the charter promises and a clear, consistent way to measure them**
- 4. Clarity of roles and responsibilities**
  - a. Role of the full board
  - b. Role of individual board members
  - c. Role of committees
  - d. Role of the School Leader
- 5. Demonstration of a clear understanding of the difference between governance and management**
- 6. Focused on results**
- 7. The right structure**
  - a. Board Size
  - b. Composition
  - c. Committee structure
  - d. Officers
- 8. Board meetings -- focused on strategic questions, not just reporting**
- 9. A School Leader who assists in the creation of effective governance**
- 10. A strong partnership between the board and the School Leader that is built on mutual trust and respect**

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## **Governance Defined:**

A Board is an organized group of volunteers who, collectively, are legally and morally accountable to the community for the health, vitality and effectiveness of the organization. As representatives of the public, the Board of Directors is the primary force pressing the organization to the realization of its opportunities for service and the fulfillment of its obligations to all its constituencies.

The general term used to describe the role of the Board of Directors is “governance.” The governance function encompasses legal responsibilities, general oversight, planning and policy-making, and fiduciary requirements.

The Board only has authority as a group. By its very nature, a board is a collective and its authority is a group function. No single individual within the board has authority for the board itself.

## **Ten Basic Responsibilities of a Nonprofit Board: <sup>1</sup>**

1. Determine the organization’s mission and purpose
2. Select the Chief Executive Officer (School Director)
3. Support the Chief Executive Officer and assess her performance
4. Ensure effective organizational planning
5. Ensure adequate resources
6. Manage resources effectively
7. Determine, monitor, and strengthen the organization’s programs and services
8. Enhance the organization’s public standing
9. Ensure legal and ethical integrity and maintain accountability
10. Recruit and orient new board members and assess board performance

## **Expectations of a Charter School Board Member:**

1. Governor  
Fulfilling governance functions
2. Ambassador  
Reaching out to the community
3. Sponsor  
Giving time and money
4. Consultant  
Using skills and expertise on behalf of the organization

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<sup>1</sup> Board Source, formerly the National Center for Nonprofit Boards

## **Charter School Board Composition:**

### 1. Ideal size of a charter school board

The LMS Bylaws require the LMS Board of Directors to be composed of an odd number between nine and fifteen members.

### 2. Most important skills

Finance

Facility -- acquisition, build out, financing

Fundraising

Legal

Personnel/Human Resources

Education -- but not too narrow, ideally someone who has run a school before

Previous governance experience

S.C. Charter School law requires at least 50 percent of the governing board to be made up of members with experience in education and/or business.

### 3. Qualities

Entrepreneurial

Sense of humor

Passion for the mission

TIME

Group process

### 4. Diversity -- in the broadest sense of the term

Ethnicity

Gender

Age

Geography

Etc.

# **Charter School Board Service**

Thank you for your interest in possibly serving on the Lowcountry Montessori School Board of Directors. Charter school board service is a weighty, yet extremely rewarding experience. To help you learn more about serving on our Board, we have compiled the following information.

## **What is the time commitment for serving on the LMS Board?**

The most effective charter school board members give 6-10 hours a month; LMS Board Members may expect to give 8-10 hours a month. This generally breaks down as:

- 2 hours per month for board meetings
- 1-2 hours per month for participating on a board committee
- 1 hour per month reading materials, preparing for meetings
- 2-4 hours per month for ambassador and fundraising tasks

At a bare minimum, you will need to be able to commit to monthly board meetings and at least two hours of work in between board meetings. Because we are a new school, serving on the LMS Board may require slightly more time than serving on the board of a more established school.

## **I don't have a background in education. Can I be an effective board member of a charter school?**

Absolutely! South Carolina charter school law requires that only fifty percent of the board members have experience in education *or* business. Although an effective charter school board should have some educators on the board (especially people who really know accountability and/or have run schools or educational institutions before), the majority of board members should have the skills that the staff of the charter school will never have.

## **What skills does the LMS Board need prospective board members to possess?**

The priority areas are:

- Financial -- both accounting and bigger picture financial management skills
- Real estate -- facility identification, negotiation, financing and property management
- Fundraising -- especially cultivating individual donors, building a donor base
- Public relations/marketing -- especially as it relates to fundraising and community building
- Human resources -- personnel policies, salaries, benefits
- Legal expertise -- general law as opposed to educational law
- Education -- especially accountability, systems, and big-picture administration of educational institutions
- Previous governance experience (nonprofit or corporate) and strong connections to our community are a plus

### **What characteristics do ideal LMS Board Members possess?**

- Passionate about the mission
- Time to commit to this important endeavor
- Ability to bring a concrete skill to the board
- Willingness/ability to serve as a governor, ambassador, sponsor and consultant
- Ability to understand the distinctions between governance and management
- Entrepreneurial spirit, comfortable with the excitement and uncertainties of starting a brand new entity from scratch
- Level of objectivity -- not close personal friends of other board members or the school leader; lack of personal agenda
- Ability to ask tough questions

### **How many members are on the LMS Board, and what is the length of their terms?**

The LMS Board must be composed of an odd number of members, with a minimum of nine and maximum of fifteen. Currently we have nine members. Board seats will be numbered. In annual elections subsequent to 2014, all board member terms will be for a period of two years. However, in order to allow for staggered terms to maintain consistency and continuity through the years, the odd-numbered seats elected in 2014 will serve a term of only one year and even-numbered seats will serve a two-year term. In 2014, any current board members who are elected will serve one-year terms. Any remaining one-year seats will be determined by a lottery conducted by the Board Development Committee.

### **How can I learn more about the LMS Board?**

1. Have an initial meeting with the chair of the board or nominating committee and the school Director
2. Learn what they are looking for in new board members and ask questions
3. Meet with additional board members
4. Attend a board meeting to see the board in action
5. Clarify what specifically the board will be looking for you to do
6. Do some soul-searching and make sure you can really give the time that is needed
7. Consider serving on a board committee to start to get to know the LMS Board better and to fully understand the commitment

### **Questions to ask along the way**

Feel free to ask lots of questions about our school and our board. The more information you have, the better you'll be able to assess whether you'll be a good fit for service on the LMS Board. Below are some questions you may want to ask; some may have already been answered in these materials.

### Organizational:

- When and how was the school founded?
- What are the school's biggest strengths to date?
- What are the school's biggest challenges and how do they plan to address them?
- How does the board know if the school is successful? How is this measured?

### Philosophical Alignment:

- What is your vision of a successful school?
- What is the core philosophy driving Lowcountry Montessori School?

### Skills and Expertise:

- What are the priority skills the school is looking for?
- How will you help fill those gaps?
- How does the school plan to fill the other gaps?

### Board:

- What are the Board's greatest strengths? Greatest weaknesses?
- What is the current Board size? What will it be like in 2 years? In 5 years?
- In the ideal situation, what would the Board be like in 5 years?
- Is there a written job description for the Board?
- What are the most important accomplishments of the Board to date?
- What does it take to be a successful member of this Board?
- What are three adjectives Board Members and/or the school Director would use to describe the board?
- If Board Members and/or the school Director could change one thing about the Board, what would it be?
- What are the most important things that the Board will focus on in the next year?
- What is the nominating process? What are the steps one must go through to be considered for the board?

### Time:

- What is the time commitment for serving on the LMS Board?

### Information you could request:

- A copy of the LMS charter
- A job description for the Board and individual performance expectations for Board Members
- Bios of the current board members (see LMS website)
- Minutes from previous board meetings to get a sense of what the board has been focusing on (see LMS website)
- A copy of LMS bylaws