

...because we believe  
in the future of our  
schools, our teachers  
and our students.

# QUALITY STANDARDS FOR CHARTER SCHOOL OPERATIONS



MEMBERSHIP FOR *My School!*

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## INTRODUCTION

The mission of the California Charter Schools Association is to **increase student achievement by supporting and expanding California's quality charter public school movement.**

From the moment a charter school petition is approved, its leaders enter into a pact, providing accountability for high student achievement in exchange for autonomy from onerous state regulations and requirements. Our ability as individuals and as a movement to live up to that bargain will determine the strength and sustainability of the charter school movement. It is not enough for charter schools to be merely as good (or as bad) as non-charter public schools, we must be better. We owe it to the students to be better. Moreover, all across the state, charter schools are proving that there is no excuse for schools that fail our students. When high expectations, strong teaching practices, supportive learning environments, and fiscal accountability are aligned, students achieve. We can and must be that beacon of hope and proof that democracy must not give up on public education—that all students will achieve if we teach them.

## BACKGROUND

The Charter Schools Act of 1992 provided opportunities for teachers, parents, pupils and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently from the existing school district structure as a method to: 1) improve pupil learning, 2) increase learning opportunities for all pupils, 3) encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods, 4) create professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site, 5) provide expanded choices in the types of opportunities that are available within the public school system, and 6) hold schools accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes.

The underlying intent of the law was the creation of a school-centered, performance-based accountability system that would provide competition within the public school system and stimulate continual improvement in *all* public schools. The “license to dream” provided by the charter law led to the creation of hundreds of charter schools in the state.

Today, over a decade later, California's charter schools reflect a variety of educational visions, pedagogical approaches, student populations and organizational designs, which make them uniquely varied and complex. The California Charter Schools Association values all types of charter school programs focused on helping students succeed in learning and in life. Diversity enriches the educational landscape.

We believe, in addition, that all charter schools in this state are bound by the commitment to improve educational opportunities for California's children. Our schools do not merely provide educational options, they must provide better options. By starting or operating a charter school, charter leaders have chosen to be accountable to their students and communities. Indeed, the success of charter schools in this state will depend upon the actions and choices for which individuals in the charter movement bear ethical, as well as professional responsibility. We believe that by conducting themselves in the manner characterized below, charter school leaders will capture the vision of quality educational opportunity, accountability for student learning, and the spirit of educational renewal embodied in the original charter law.

The California Charter Schools Association and its Member Council are committed to supporting all charter schools in reaching excellence through meeting quality standards.

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## QUALITY STANDARD 1: STUDENT ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT FIRST

A charter school promotes student learning through a clear vision and high expectations. It achieves clear, measurable program goals and student learning objectives, including meeting its stated performance standards and closing achievement gaps of students.

### 1.1 Achieves clear, measurable program goals and student learning objectives, including meeting its stated performance standards

1.1A: Program goals are clear and measurable

1.1B: The school is meeting its stated performance standards

1.1C: The school clearly articulates its curricular content standards and performance standards, including the minimum student performance required for advancement or graduation

1.1D: The school is making adequate yearly progress in meeting academic goals as defined by NCLB

### 1.2 Demonstrates high expectations for student achievement

1.2A: Learning materials have rich content and strong vocabulary

1.2B: The curriculum clearly identifies essential and enduring knowledge, and assessments effectively support students' long-term mastery of essential knowledge

1.2C: The curriculum is structured in a coherent grade-by-grade sequence

1.2D: The curriculum prepares students for life-long learning, careers, and active citizenship

### 1.3 Provides a challenging and coherent curriculum for each individual student

1.3A: The school has strategies in place to meet the needs of students who are not reading at grade level

1.3B: The school has strategies in place to meet the needs of English Language Learners

1.3C: The school has effective strategies in place to meet the needs of students with Special Education plans (504s)

1.3D: The school is closing achievement gaps among student sub-groups

1.3E: Strategies designed to ensure that all students are making progress towards meeting academic goals are evaluated regularly and modified to improve student achievement

### 1.4 Implements and directs learning experiences (consistent with the school's purpose and charter) that actively engage students

1.4A: Students report a high level of enthusiasm for learning across the curriculum based on valid and reliable survey data

1.4B: Students and teachers use resources for learning experiences beyond the limits of the textbook and classroom—such as effective use of technology and community resources

### 1.5 Allocates appropriate resources in the way of instructional materials, staffing and facilities to promote high levels of student achievement

1.5A: Available resources are allocated appropriately (among materials, equipment, staff, and facilities) to optimize student learning

### 1.6 Supports students in a safe, healthy and nurturing environment characterized by trust, caring and professionalism

1.6A: The school environment is free of violence, the threat of violence, and bullying

1.6B: Adequate safety procedures and crisis plans are in place

1.6C: The school environment is healthy, and processes are in place to promote student health and wellness

1.6D: The learning environment is clean, attractive, functional, and comfortable

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1.6E: Students feel supported and respected by teachers and staff

1.6F: The school has a comprehensive student discipline policy (including due process procedures for suspension and expulsion) that is distributed to parents and students annually

1.7 Productively engages parental and community involvement as a part of the school's support system

1.7A: Students, parents, and community members are involved as part of the school's support system

1.8 Shares its vision among the school community and demonstrates its mission in daily action and practice

1.8A: The mission and vision of the school is clearly articulated, well-known by school stakeholders, and implemented in daily practice

## QUALITY STANDARD 2: ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

The leaders of a charter school are stewards of the charter's mission and vision and carry out their duties in a professional, responsible and ethical manner. Charter school leaders use their influence and authority for the primary purpose of achieving student success.

2.1 Effectively communicates and engages stakeholders in the vision and mission of the school

2.1A: The board and school leadership clearly and effectively communicate the mission and goals of the school with all relevant stakeholder groups

2.2 Consistently puts into practice the educational program outlined in its charter

2.2A: The school leadership implements its academic program in alignment with its charter

2.3 Generates and sustains a school culture conducive to student learning and staff professional growth

2.3A: School leadership provides professional development opportunities that advance the effectiveness of teaching and learning

2.3B: There is open and clear communication between students, staff, and administration

2.4 Regularly monitors and evaluates the success of the school's program

2.4A: The school leadership collects student achievement data to inform a continuous cycle of school improvement

2.4B: The school seeks input from stakeholders in the monitoring and evaluation of the school's program

2.5 Provides regular, public reports on the school's progress towards achieving its goals to the school community and to the school's authorizer

2.5A: School leadership participates in the development of a school accountability report card as required by law

2.5B: Leadership provides regular school progress reports and student achievement data to all stakeholders

2.6 Makes management decisions with the goal of optimizing successful teaching and learning experiences

2.6A: Students and staff report that leadership is working effectively to create an optimal teaching and learning environment

2.7 Treats all individuals with fairness, dignity and respect

2.7A: School leaders ensure that school policies regarding equal opportunity and unlawful harassment are effectively implemented

2.7B: School stakeholders report that they are treated with fairness, dignity, and respect

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**2.8 Has a cogent understanding of the laws that govern charter schools and monitors the trends, issues and potential changes in the environment in which charter schools operate**

2.8A: School leadership has developed policies and training practices that clarify the responsibilities and relationships among key leaders, governing board members, staff, students and parents

2.8B: School leadership participates regularly in professional development opportunities which provide insight into the trends, issues and potential changes in the environment in which charter schools operates

**2.9 Uses his/her influence and authority for the primary purpose of achieving student success**

2.9A: School leaders make decisions that reflect high standards and ethics

2.9B: Leaders allocate resources based primarily on their impact on student achievement and well-being

2.9C: Leaders implement business policies and procedures that promote school sustainability, operational integrity, and a focus on student learning results

**2.10 Abstains from any decision involving a potential or actual conflict of interest**

2.10A: Leadership does not engage in actions that present a conflict of interest

2.10B: Board members and employees formally declare any conflicts of interest or potential conflicts of interest he or she may have in relationship to the fiscal policies and operation of the charter school

**2.11 Respects diversity and implements practices that are inclusive of all types of learners consistent with the school charter**

2.11A: The leadership implements programs and policies that enable all students to be effectively served, including special education and second language learners

**2.12 Engages community involvement in the school**

2.12A: The board and school leadership develop and implement an effective communications plan that engages community support

2.12B: The school actively engages board members, parents, students and staff in the communications plan

## QUALITY STANDARD 3: CONTINUOUS FOCUS ON INCREASING QUALITY

A charter school engages in a process of continuous self-improvement in order to increase the effectiveness of its educational program. The school regularly assesses and evaluates student learning based on stated goals.

**3.1 Uses information sources, data collection and data analysis strategies for self-examination and improvement**

3.1A: The school implements a quality assurance process that systematically analyzes and advances the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies in relationship to student performance results

3.1B: The school's continuous improvement process focuses on closing learning gaps for individual students and student subgroups

3.1C: The school has processes for the management of student information and student assessment data used in a self-improvement process targeting student achievement

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## 3.2 Establishes benchmarks and a variety of accountability tools for monitoring student progress

3.2A: The school has well-defined benchmarks for student achievement that are clearly communicated to students and parents

3.2B: A variety of tools are in place for monitoring student progress

## 3.3 Establishes both long and short term goals and plans for accomplishing the school's mission as stated in its charter

3.3A: The school has well-defined long and short-term goals that are clearly linked to its mission and vision

## 3.4 Uses student assessment results to improve curriculum and instruction

3.4A: The school administers mandated assessments

3.4B: Student achievement is measured utilizing meaningful, reliable and valid performance benchmarks

## 3.5 Uses the results of evaluation and assessment as the basis for the allocation of resources for programmatic improvement

3.5A: The school deploys resources for programmatic improvement using the results of program evaluation and student assessment data

## 3.6 Involves staff, students, parents and other stakeholders in its accountability for student learning and in the school's program evaluation process

3.6A: The school provides evidence of parent/guardian satisfaction

3.6B: The school provides evidence of student satisfaction

## QUALITY STANDARD 4: RESPONSIBLE GOVERNANCE

A charter school board and administration establish and implement policies that are transparent and focused on student achievement. Charter school board members and administrators have a cogent understanding of and comply with the laws that govern charter schools.

### 4.1 Ensure that policies are implemented in a fair and consistent manner

4.1A: The charter school governance follows a fully adopted set of bylaws that include policies which include: conflicts of interest policies, meeting protocols and procedures, and formal delineations of roles and authorities within the charter school

4.1B: Conflicts of interest policies are comprehensive and address the disqualification of a board member or employees to act upon matters which may materially affect his/her assets and income

4.1C: The school's governance policies are organized and/or may be made easily accessible to the public and may be made readily available to the public

4.1D: The charter school has clearly defined complaint and conflict resolution procedures which are communicated to all stakeholders

### 4.2 Monitor the trends, issues and potential changes in the environment in which charter schools operate

4.2A: The school administration and governing board includes individuals who are experienced in managing organizations and well-versed in charter law

4.2B: New board members are given a formal orientation on the purpose and educational vision of the school and on their roles and legal responsibilities

4.2C: School administrators and board members actively seek information and professional development related to charter operations and laws

4.2D: Schools with multiple sites have comprehensive monitoring systems established for ensuring that those sites meet the charter's mission and goals

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## 4.3 Seek input from impacted stakeholders

- 4.3A: The school establishes regular opportunities for stakeholders to address the administration and board (i.e. parent meetings, surveys, staff meetings, student forums, etc...)
- 4.3B: The board conducts its meetings regularly (at least quarterly) and in an organized and effective manner to encourage public comment and participation
- 4.3C: Board meeting agendas and meeting minutes are posted in a timely manner for broad public review

## 4.4 Enact policies that respect diversity and implements practices that are inclusive of all types of learners consistent with the school charter

- 4.4A: The school's recruitment strategies focus on the targeted population stated in its charter and are inclusive of a diverse range of learners.
- 4.4B: The school has clear open enrollment procedures and (if over-subscribed) an adopted public lottery policy for enrollment

## 4.5 Actively engage the school's authorizer in monitoring the school's educational program and its fiscal status

- 4.5A: The school provides regular reports of student performance, academic progress and the school's fiscal health to the authorizer
- 4.5B: The school's legal and financial structures are clearly delineated with the authorizing agency
- 4.5C: Operational agreements, contracts and MOU's have been established with the authorizing agency in key areas such as liability, special education, and facilities
- 4.5D: The charter authorizing agency regularly reviews the adopted budget and interim reports

## QUALITY STANDARD 5: FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A charter school fulfills its fiduciary responsibility for public funds and maintains publicly accessible fiscal records. The school conducts an annual financial audit which is made public.

### 5.1 Creates and monitors immediate and long-range financial plans to effectively implement the school's educational program and ensure financial stability

- 5.1A: Comprehensive budget assumptions are prepared during the budget process.
- 5.1B: The working budget is monitored against actuals at least monthly, including a review of ADA assumptions, and adjusted accordingly
- 5.1C: Accounts payable obligations are up-to-date, appropriately described, and disclosed in financial statements
- 5.1D: The budget considers any long-term debt schedules and multi-year contracts, and capital projects are tracked and monitored on a regular basis
- 5.1E: There is an annual review of the status of all significant operating costs, including employee salary and benefit discussions, negotiations, any changes in health benefit costs, and any other significant costs

### 5.2 Conducts an annual financial audit which is made public

- 5.2A: The charter school is audited by a certified public accountant (CPA) or public accountant (PA) licensed by the California State Board of Accountancy (and not declared ineligible to conduct audits by the State Controller's Office)
- 5.2B: The charter school's audit is performed in accordance with generally accepted auditing standards to ensure that the school's finances are being managed in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and practices
- 5.2C: The audit tests the validity of the charter school's ADA and reports these findings in the audit report
- 5.2D: The charter school receives a school-specific audit report that includes financial statements and audit findings/conclusions specific to the charter school (unless completely dependent on the district)

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- 5.2E: The audit report includes a management letter commenting on areas of possible improvements (if any) in structures, procedures, and management practices of the school, as well as any factors that would prevent them from issuing an unqualified opinion on the financial statements
- 5.2F: The charter school board reviews the audit report and responds to any audit findings and designs a corrective action plan to address these findings
- 5.2G: A copy of the audit is sent by the charter school to the authorizing agency, the COE and CDE by legally mandated deadlines, and the authorizing agency reviews the charter school's corrective action in response to any audit exceptions

## 5.3 Establishes clear fiscal policies to ensure that public funds are used appropriately and wisely

- 5.3A: The school adheres to an adopted fiscal policy and procedures manual
- 5.3B: Fiscal policies include procedures for the authorization of purchases and release of funds, including signatories for checks or purchase orders over a specified threshold, and procedures related to credit cards and revolving cash funds
- 5.3C: Bank reconciliations for all school-affiliated bank accounts are completed and reviewed on a monthly basis (person empowered to sign the check is not the same person (or related to the person) who reconciles the account)
- 5.3D: The charter governing board adopts a budget at least 30 days prior to the new fiscal year

## 5.4 Ensures financial resources are directly related to the school's purpose: student achievement of learning goals

- 5.4A: The school's physical space, materials and supplies are conducive to accomplishing the charter's schoolwide learning goals
- 5.4B: Policies are established to ensure that contracts reflect fair market value
- 5.4C: Compensation levels for employees are appropriate for the positions and responsibilities and are consistent with industry norms
- 5.4D: There is an inventory of fixed assets and other resources over an established amount

## RESOURCES

California Charter Schools Association Quality Standards are adopted and modified from WASC/Charter Schools Focus on Learning (2004), the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards for School Leadership (1996), and the California Charter Schools Association Membership Council (2004).

The California Charter Schools Association also acknowledges the work done by the former California Network of Educational Charters in defining exemplary charter school operations.