

ILLINOIS STATE CHARTER SCHOOL COMMISSION

BIENNIAL BEST PRACTICE REPORT

Developing and managing a high-quality process to request and evaluate charter school proposals



INTRODUCTION

As part of its legal mandate to improve the quality of the statewide charter ecosystem, the Illinois State Charter School Commission (“SCSC” or “the Commission”) is tasked with issuing regular reports on best practices in charter school authorizing.

This report focuses on the first step in developing a high-quality charter school portfolio: soliciting and evaluating new charter proposals.

The Commission defines best practice in charter school authorizing as those which are:

1. Aligned with the *Principles and Standards for Quality Authorizing* as issued by the **National Association of Charter School Authorizers**; and
2. Implemented by authorizing agencies with high-quality portfolios of charter schools.

This report is designed as a companion to the Commission’s Model Charter School Request for Proposals (“RFP”). It is intended to be a primer for districts to guide the development of customized documents and processes, and not as a hard-and-fast mandate.

Districts across the state have different needs, priorities, and student populations, and a high-quality RFP and evaluation process can support achievement of a local school board’s goals.

BENEFITS OF RELEASING AN RFP

There are significant benefits to proactively soliciting proposals:

1. Identifying partners to operate schools that meet a specific district need and align with district strategic priorities to support and improve academic outcomes for all students;
2. Minimizing the impact of proposal evaluation on overall district function by controlling the flow of new school proposals and creating economies of scale;
3. Ensuring compliance with state statute regarding new school proposal submission and evaluation;
4. Reducing the likelihood of appeals to the SCSC by evidencing alignment with best practices and state laws.

Soliciting proposals for schools that meet district priorities

A well-developed RFP describes any district priorities for new schools. Across the state and the nation, authorizers have defined priority programs, geographies and/or school types that are of particular interest.

Examples of such programs might include:

- a) Schools that serve a specific student population (e.g. alternative learning schools for students who have dropped out or are over-age or under credited for high school graduation);
- b) Schools that focus on career pathways aligned with local business or industry growth;
- c) Schools that offer specialized academic programs of interest to the district (e.g. STEM, language immersion, performing arts, early college or dual credit university partnerships).

Supporting efficient use of district resources

By establishing a formal process for proposing a new charter school, a district can control the timing of proposal submissions in order to allocate sufficient resources to the evaluation process. When a district moves from a reactive ad hoc process—evaluating individual proposals as they are submitted—to a proactive, well defined process, it creates efficiency by consolidating the labor-intensive work of managing the process and evaluating the proposals, and promotes consistent presentations of evidence from all applicants, simplifying proposal evaluation.

Ensuring legal compliance

Illinois charter school law prescribes a strict timeline—limited to 75 days from receipt of a complete proposal to decision by the authorizer—for evaluating new school proposals submitted to school districts, and lays out the basis for a district to determine whether to approve or deny a proposal.

By establishing a formal RFP and evaluation process, a district can define the role and responsibilities of the applicant, of the district's staff, and the local school board, which ensures that all parties operate in a transparent and equitable fashion. In defining the process, the district is also able to ensure that all applicants address the 15 elements that define the minimum description of a new school that must be detailed in a proposal.

Minimizing the grounds for appeals to the SCSC

Charter school proposals that are denied or not timely acted upon have a statutory right to file an appeal to the SCSC. Local districts are invited to present responses to any appeal.

The SCSC decides whether to grant or deny a charter on an appeal based on whether:

1. The proposal is in compliance with the law; and
2. Chartering the proposed school is in the best interests of the students the proposed school is designed to serve.

Districts that can demonstrate their RFP and evaluation processes comply with the law and best practice, and afford proper due process to the applicant, are more likely to overcome appeals. See 105 ILCS 5/27A.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HIGH-QUALITY RFP AND EVALUATION PROCESS

A proactive and high-quality new school chartering approach is characterized by a number of elements, including:

1. Issuing a formal, written request for new school proposals which clearly defines the criteria against which each proposal will be evaluated;
2. Defining the precise timeline for the proposal, evaluation, and decision making process that meets the state's requirements and allows sufficient time both for applicants to develop quality proposals and for thorough evaluation of the evidence submitted in each proposal;
3. Utilizing teams of subject-matter experts to evaluate the new school proposals;
4. Conducting an in-person interview to assess the ability of the proposed school leadership team and governing board to open and operate a high-quality school;
5. Making a formal recommendation to approve or deny each proposal to the local school board; and
6. Decision-making focused on the analysis of the evaluation team and the evidence presented.

EXECUTING WITH TRANSPARENCY, OBJECTIVITY AND EQUITY

It is critical when developing and executing an RFP and evaluation process that districts protect the interests of their students, staff, and board members while also treating all applicants equitably. In order to do this, it is essential that districts take an active role in publicizing their RFP processes. At the minimum, districts should undertake the following actions:

1. Announce the RFP in advance of the release date;
2. Publish the RFP and the evaluation criteria, so that applicants and the public understand the expectations;
3. Publish the complete timeline for the process, from release to decision, and ensure that the timeline includes sufficient time for the development of a high-quality proposal and a thorough evaluation (generally 6 to 12 weeks);
4. Present at least one opportunity for an applicant information session to ensure that the instructions are clear, and/or connect applicants with charter support organizations;
5. Do not modify or add to proposal requirements or evaluative steps after the process has begun;
6. Conduct a closed interview led by a team of evaluators to assess each proposal and the capacity of the applicant team;
7. Host a public hearing to provide the opportunity for public comment from community stakeholders;
8. Present a formal recommendation based on careful analysis of the evidence presented in the written proposal and interview;
9. Public decision-making which is based on the analysis of the evaluators and the evidence presented.

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COMPONENTS OF AN RFP

A well-developed RFP is comprised of a suite of documents including, at a minimum:

1. An introduction to the **district priorities**, and the RFP and Evaluation process;
2. The **timeline** for the process, including **specific deadlines and milestones**, from the issuance of the RFP through the issuance of a decision;
3. Specific guidelines on the **acceptable format** for a proposal, **technical specifications** for proposal submission, and a list of required attachments;
4. A **list of questions or writing prompts** to which all applicants must respond in order to demonstrate a comprehensive plan for the academic, operational, and financial plans for the school; and
5. The **evaluation criteria** which will be used to establish the standard for approval of the proposal.

Districts may also want to consider including the following elements, which will support applicants in developing clearly presented content and submitting complete proposals to enable consistency in evaluation:

- A comprehensive checklist that establishes the basis for the district's acceptance of proposals;
- Template documents that applicants must use to submit specific elements of the proposal; *for instance, a proposal coversheet, budget workbook, board member questionnaire, curriculum selection table, etc.*
- Online document submission using a file sharing system or online proposal software platform.

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DIFFERENTIATION FOR CLARITY AND PRIORITY

When issuing an RFP, districts should differentiate **in two key ways by clearly establishing any differences in requirements or additional requirements for:**

1. **New school operator types**, who have never launched a new charter school before; and existing school operators, who have experience opening and operating a school.
2. **Various types** of school programs (such as exact replication of a current school model, virtual schools, alternative schools, or unique curricular models).

EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENTIATED RFPs

OPERATOR TYPES

NEW OPERATORS	EXISTING OPERATORS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined as applicants who have never previously launched/operated a school • Questions are almost entirely future-oriented • Requests require evidence of successful school and classroom leadership by the applicants; evidence of fiscal responsibility and financial management at scale 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defined as applicants who currently or have previously launched/operated a school, including applications from education service providers • Questions assess the track record of the organization and its model previously, as well as the plan for the proposed school • Requests evidence of results of success with students similar to those served by the proposed campus • Includes due diligence of the performance and financials of the existing schools for up to five years

PROGRAM TYPES

SCHOOL MODEL	REPLICATION OF AN EXISTING SCHOOL	BOARDS CONTRACTING WITH EDUCATION SERVICE PROVIDERS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes additional questions that assess the unique aspects of a specific school model, especially those that are substantially different than traditional district schools, such as online learning (“virtual” schools) and dropout recovery models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requests evidence of results of success with students similar to those served by the proposed campus • Includes due diligence of the performance of the existing schools for almost/close to five years • Assesses the capacity of the current organization to maintain quality at existing campuses while expanding to new sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requests evidence of results of success with students similar to those served by the proposed campus • Includes due diligence of the performance and financials of the existing schools for up to five years • Interview assesses the preparedness of the proposed board and their understanding of the recommended contract

SUPPORT FOR APPLICANTS AND AUTHORIZERS

The Illinois Network of Charter Schools provides support and technical assistance to prospective charter school operators. For more information, contact C. Allison Jack at ajack@incschools.org or call 312-690-2708.

Illinois State Board of Education manages the federal Charter School Program (CSP) Grant, which offers three grant opportunities to approved charter school applicants and existing charter schools. For more information contact: David Turovetz at dturovet@isbe.net or 312-814-3222.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers provides direct, professional services to improve charter authorizer practices, including application decision management, to local boards of education. For more information, contact Olivia Roser at oliviar@qualitycharters.org or call 312-376-2365.

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