

Charter Renewal Do's and Don'ts through an Authorizer's Lens

By Stephanie Cho, Development Manager, EdTec Inc.

Renewal can be a daunting process for even the most prepared and organized charter schools. The process is time-consuming and often produces anxiety within the community because of the uncertainty and politics that surround charter approvals and renewals. In an effort to shed some light on what authorizers look for from schools going through renewal, EdTec conducted interviews with authorizers from around the state, to get their take on how schools can equip themselves to emerge successful.



Keith Butler
Business Advisory Services Consultant
San Diego County Office of Education

Q: *What have you seen schools do that make for a successful renewal petition?*

A: Successful schools start early and carefully watch for deadlines. Schools that don't plan ahead and are still making significant corrections in March and April will face a challenging renewal process. It's important for schools to come to an agreement with their authorizers on oversight. Figure out what is expected ahead of time and address those expectations.

Q: *What are some common issues you see schools fail to address in their petitions that hurt their renewal efforts?*

A: Common pitfalls tend to happen in the budget assumptions. The numbers presented in the petition budget need to be based on reality. The school needs to be able to back up their enrollment numbers and provide evidence to support other specific assumptions, and other details such as what a school is paying for its space, liability insurance, etc. Schools can run into problems when the funding rates used are not from SSC (School Services of California) or another credible provider, the ADA isn't sufficiently backed up, or cash flow timing isn't accurate or consistent with state apportionment schedules. Expenses should tie to both the school's historical data and incorporate what's on the horizon. For example, healthcare costs year over year should be consistent with previous policies (e.g. a cap) and anticipate future needs/increases. Expenses should be clearly laid out and classified by category and object code. Overall, the financials should include actuals as well as a good list of assumptions for the projections.

Q: *What would you like to see more of when you review renewal petitions?*

A: More documentation and specification that backs up what's written. For example, the school's learning outcomes – what methods exactly is the school using to achieve those outcomes? We like to see *how* schools are meeting the various measurable pupil outcomes (MPOs). When shortcomings are identified, what system is in place that lays out exactly how to drive change and what are the results expected to come from the change system?

Q: Sometimes schools put in very aggressive goals in their original petitions, often at the request of the authorizer, and then fall short of meeting those goals. What can a charter do in that situation?

A: Revise your projections early, incorporating various scenarios that are reasonable. For example, show that you've thought through the different scenarios that could happen – projections based on current data, current projections plus a cost of living adjustment to your salaries, current projections plus cuts, etc. On the instructional side, the goal is to show that you know what you're doing and are able to offer realistic alternatives if the status quo isn't working.

Q: What is your main piece of advice to schools that are going through the renewal process this year?

A: Agree with your authorizer on expectations regarding oversight guidelines, and keep communication open.



José J. Cole-Gutiérrez
Director, Charter Schools
Innovation and Charter Schools Division
Los Angeles Unified School District

Q: What have you seen schools do that make for a successful renewal petition?

A: More effective schools are the ones planning well ahead the year *before* renewal. These schools have gone through each and every year, well aware of how they have done performance-wise, engaged their communities, engaged their boards, and have made the time for self-assessment. This positions them well to prepare for earning another five years. These schools can also address what they can improve in the next five years. Other steps that schools have taken include looking at the LAUSD oversight report on a yearly basis, taking corrective action when necessary, and communicating with their assigned renewal team well ahead of time. Schools that do well have addressed problems in advance, so that during the actual renewal process LAUSD doesn't have to go back to those issues. On the finance side, finances should be in good order and the cash flow and balance sheet need to look strong.

Q: What would you like to see more of when you review renewal petitions?

A: More of a demonstration of community and staff support. I'd also like to see school staff proactively addressing outstanding issues and boldly envisioning what they want to accomplish in the next five years. Ultimately, we want to see a strong performing school that meets the needs of all students.

Q: What is your main piece of advice to schools that are going through the renewal process this year?

A: Be very clear and proud of your accomplishments for students as candidly as possible. Celebrate! At the same time, let us know what challenges you face and how you plan to deal with them. Looking back, ask yourself how did we do based on empirical data? What did we do well and how can we do more of that? Looking forward, how will we change to meet the evolving needs of our community? Regarding financial challenges, how can we be more prudent?

Q: Do you have any other comments?

A: LAUSD has 30 schools up for renewal this year. In many cases, this is more than districts have in charters total. We want to make it an efficient process for community, staff, and the school, and we value a collaborative approach with schools. We believe in high performing schools and holding schools accountable. We are open to those conversations on how schools have done.



**Staff Contributions
Office of Charter Schools
Oakland Unified School District**

Q: *What have you seen schools do that make for a successful renewal petition?*

A: Our office publishes both a Petition Evaluation Instrument for all charter petitions and a Charter Renewal Handbook that includes guidance on the renewal process and on the charter renewal quality standards. Using these resources can help a school produce a more complete document that supports their case for renewal with specific evidence related to our standards. However, the specific content of the school's renewal petition is less important than the quality of its performance throughout the preceding charter term.

Q: *What are some common issues you see schools fail to address in their petitions that hurt their renewal efforts?*

A: Our quality standards cover four key questions: 1) Is the school academically sound?; 2) Is the school an effective and viable organization?; 3) Has the school been faithful to the terms of its charter?; and 4) Is the school's petition reasonably comprehensive? A school that has not implemented the program described in the charter and has not met or made substantial progress towards meeting the measurable pupil outcomes (MPOs) in its charter is unlikely to be renewed. Note that making a case for meeting or making substantial progress towards MPOs involves using data that the school has been collecting over the entire term of the charter, so strong data collection systems are critical. We respect the charter as an agreement between the district and the school, in which the school accepts strong accountability in exchange for increased autonomy. They are accountable for achieving the outcomes described in their charter, so schools that fail to address these, or fail to describe why they have taken a different approach, hurt their renewal efforts.

Q: *What would you like to see more of when you review renewal petitions?*

A: Charter renewal provides a chance for the school to reflect on the preceding years and engage in serious self-evaluation, involving all stakeholders. We believe a quality school should take this opportunity to revise its charter to include plans for continuous improvement in all aspects of the academic program, management, and governance.

Q: *Sometimes schools put in very aggressive goals in its original petition, often at the request of the authorizer, and then fall short of meeting those goals. What can a charter do in that situation?*

A: Our quality standards look for student outcomes that are aligned with the school's mission: clear, specific and measurable, and ambitious yet attainable. Because we review a school's performance with respect to its student outcomes every year, a school concerned about over-ambitious goals should be raising the issue with our office during the charter term. Then during charter renewal, the school can provide in its petition an explanation (based on reliable data) of why the outcomes were not met (or substantial progress was not made) and describe what they propose as ambitious and attainable goals for the next charter term.

Q: *When do you advise a school to submit their petition, and what specific information do you request, above and beyond the normal petition?*

A: We accept charter renewal petitions no earlier than October 1st of the charter's final year and recommend submission no later than the end of January. Schools that consider themselves at risk of

denial may wish to submit earlier to allow time for appeals. In addition to the charter petition, we require a Performance Report that is to be prepared in draft prior to our site inspection and then finalized as part of the charter renewal submission.

Q: *Are there things prior to the one year renewal process that you would like to see charters do? What would you like to see three years ahead of renewal? Two years?*

A: From the first day of operation, schools should make sure that they are tracking the MPOs to which they have committed in their charters. Progress toward achievement of these outcomes should be checked regularly throughout the school year, with program adjustments made in response. As renewal approaches, but while there is still time for meaningful change, schools should review the renewal quality standards published by our office and honestly assess their own performance. Rather than viewing charter renewal as a periodic compliance task, the MPOs and charter renewal standards should be integrated into the school's continuous improvement process.



Dr. Lucretia D. Peebles
Director
Charter Schools Department
Santa Clara County Office of Education

Q: *What have you seen schools do that make for a successful renewal petition?*

A: Schools that approach the renewal process with a clear understanding of the legal requirements outlined in the California Education Code and the authorizer's expectations submit renewal petitions that are complete and inclusive of new legislation pertaining to renewals. Schools that submit successful renewal petitions also meet with the authorizer to review the renewal process and timeline at least a year in advance of submitting the petition. These schools review the guidelines and authorizer's expectations with their boards and work collaboratively to ensure that the renewal logistics are communicated to those who will be working on the renewal petition.

Q: *What would you like to see more of when you review renewal petitions?*

A: I would like to see more comprehensively described in the renewal petition, the education program and changes that have occurred during the implementation phase, including how students will experience the academic program, how learning will occur, and learning outcomes and assessments. Additionally, I would like to have petitioners include clear descriptions about governance, how board trustees will be recruited and elected, the length of the term a board member will serve, the desired board composition (racial/ethnic, geographical, expertise), the process the school will use to include in its decision-making, input from parents, teachers, and community members, whether the school will have an independent board, and details on how parents will be included in decision-making opportunities apart from the board. The financial plan and projected budget and assumptions for the five-year renewal plan require accurate information and descriptions.

Q: *Sometimes schools put in very aggressive goals in its original petition, often at the request of the authorizer, and then fall short of meeting those goals. What can a charter do in that situation?*

A: A charter should be transparent about the goals it selects and its anticipated challenges in achieving these goals. Charters often develop their goals with input from their teachers, staff, parents, and boards. The authorizer's recommendations for goals are based on an analysis of the charter petition and the desired goal of the authorizer to support high performing charter schools. To this end, charters can work

in concert with the authorizer to ensure that the goals that are included in the renewal petition are attainable and can be implemented within the term of the charter. The charter can provide justification for the inclusion and deletion of specific goals. The charter might request a material revision if it feels it cannot meet certain goals. The authorizer can explain the material revision process and then suggest information that will assist the board in making a decision on the material revision.

Q: *When do you advise a school to submit their petition, and what specific information do you request, above and beyond the normal petition?*

A: Schools are advised to submit the petition in early fall for a charter expiring the following June. Charters are also asked to submit a completed charter petition review matrix, an analysis of student academic performance disaggregated by subgroups, and the results of satisfaction surveys administered to students, teachers, and parents.

Q: *What is your main piece of advice to schools that are going through the renewal process this year?*

A: Set up a meeting with the authorizer a year before the charter is to expire to discuss the renewal process. Become familiar with the renewal guidelines and work with your authorizer so that you understand how the process will be handled. Become knowledgeable about the renewal timeline, the roles and responsibilities of the charter and the authorizer, and expectations for the public hearing and decision meeting.

EdTec would like to thank the above authorizers for contributing their time and knowledge. All of the authorizers echoed throughout each interview that renewal should not be viewed as simply an obligatory assignment to be completed every five years, but rather, a continuous process to track progress and improve the school. All charters face renewal at some point, and no matter where your school might currently fall on that timeline, it's always a good time to:

- **Stay in the know on requirements and timelines.** Rules and laws related to the renewal process are continually changing and it's critical to stay on top of which ones apply to your school. Furthermore, your authorizer might have specific oversight guidelines and timelines they want you to follow. In general, it is recommended you start drafting your renewal petition 18 months to no less than a year in advance of the charter expiration date to give yourself adequate time for back and forth communications between you and your authorizer and an appeals process if necessary. Check with your authorizer regarding exact timelines for submitting the renewal petition.
- **Maintain constant and open contact with your authorizer.** Communication is particularly important because you want to create context around both the successes and shortcomings of your school well before the renewal year. Authorizers appreciate transparency and want schools to be realistic about their plans. Come to an agreement on oversight ahead of time and know what their expectations are so you can tailor your petition to address any specific concerns.

- **Utilize data assessment and analysis.** While qualitative aspects such as positive testimonials are important, authorizers like to see hard facts and longitudinal assessment data to substantiate how you are meeting your goals and delivering results. Concrete, specific and measurable data is a convincing way to show your authorizer that you can both back up your claims on past performance and have a tool for formative assessments going forward. Use data analysis to showcase your successes. At the same time, the data can expose your weaknesses – so be honest about the areas you're looking to improve, and how you plan to focus on those areas.
- **Get a strong handle on your finances.** The petition budget and cash flow are concrete areas that your authorizer will review closely, especially in this unforgiving economic environment. Make sure your assumptions make sense with the goals outlined in the rest of your petition. Be able to speak intelligently on the financial situation of your school. If you are working with any consultants or back-office providers in this area, leverage them to go through every assumption with you so that you have a thorough understanding of your finances.
- **Engage key stakeholders.** Don't wait until you are walking into your renewal hearing to garner community support. Authorizers want to see an active, involved board that is well aware of the details of the renewal petition, along with parents, staff, and students who are genuinely excited and interested in the continued existence of their school.
- **Set aside time for regular self-evaluation.** Throughout each year, periodically reflect on how your school is meeting the MPOs pledged in its original charter and set up a process for developing program adjustments to address any deficiencies. Have a team devoted to self assessment and responsible for executing and holding the school accountable to a results-oriented action plan.
- **Budget time and resources for strategic planning.** In addition to regular check-ins on the progress of meeting the charter's MPOs, plan time for key stakeholders to establish real, viable tactics for the long-term health and wellbeing of your school. Conduct a needs assessment and develop a clear strategic roadmap to establish and tackle long-term objectives for the sustainability of your school.

Though many aspects of the renewal process can be trying, you should remember that it is also a great opportunity to showcase your school's strengths and accomplishments. Stay in control of the process by starting early and regularly communicating with your authorizer to give yourself the best chance possible at getting your charter renewed, and it doesn't necessarily have to be a bumpy ride. 🍃

This article was written with additional EdTec Inc. staff contributions from Bryce Fleming, Peter Laub, Dorothy Lee, and Kelly Theofanis.