



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER ON  
**CHARTER  
SCHOOL**  
FINANCE & GOVERNANCE

# PROMISING PRACTICE PROFILE

## Preparing for the Inevitable: Planning for Leadership Succession at the School, Charter Management Organization, and State Agency Levels

New Orleans Charter Middle School, Rose Management, and Delaware State Department of Education

**SUMMARY** Charter schools are often unprepared when the founding school leader leaves, especially if this individual was the one to design and implement the school's vision. Transitions can be tumultuous as the new school leader works to engage the staff and sustain community ties, and the school may falter if too much institutional knowledge leaves with the founding leader. In this promising practice profile, the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance describes efforts to plan for a smooth leadership succession from three different perspectives: a school site, a charter management organization, and a state department of education. By planning for leadership succession early on, charter schools can avoid problems when a leader leaves and can use the opportunity of his or her departure to advance organizational growth.

### Promising Practice in:

- Charter School Finance
- Charter School Governance

### Implemented by:

- State Policymaker
- Charter Authorizer
- Charter Operator
- Other

### Inside:

- Implementation Details
- Impact
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**BACKGROUND** Succession planning can help create a seamless transition and prevent the instability created by a change in charter school leadership. This preparation can occur at different levels of the system, creating an infrastructure that makes leadership transition natural and even beneficial to the future of the school. At New Orleans Charter Middle School, this planning happened at the school level; the previous principal worked closely with the new school leader for six months to transmit important institutional knowledge. In Arizona, Rose Management, a charter management organization that oversees three charter schools known as the Rose Academies, uses a systematic approach to succession to grow leaders from within their schools and central



office organization. Delaware's State Action for Education Leadership Project, a division of the state department of education, has worked with local school districts to develop the "Pool of 100," a diverse group of leaders trained to take leadership positions in both charter and district-run public schools as well as in district administration.

## School Level

Bree Dusseault was the founding principal of New Orleans Charter Middle School when it reopened in 2007 with plans to serve students in grades four through eight. In January 2008, the school leadership team decided to change to a kindergarten through grade four focus based on the needs of the community. Dusseault and other school leaders thought it was necessary to bring in a new principal with early education expertise given the school's new direction. FirstLine Schools, the charter management organization (CMO) for the middle school, hired a new school leader several months prior to Dusseault leaving to help transmit important school knowledge.

## Charter Management Organization Level

The first Rose academy received its original charter in 1998 and grew to three campuses during the next nine years. As the schools and the CMO expanded, it was clear to CEO Eugene Kinghorn, Ph.D., that he and other administrators needed to focus on how they would fill the newly available positions. The team decided an integrated, system-wide approach would help meet both immediate and long-term leadership needs.

## State Level

In 2002, a group of Delaware legislators, principals, and business leaders formed an education task force to address education concerns and offer policy suggestions to improve education. Using demographic data, the group was able to forecast education leadership needs within the state for the next 10 years based on transfer, retirement, and resignation trends. A key recommendation from these findings was to develop a "Pool of 100," a group of teachers who showed leadership potential and were identified for a school leadership career track.

The State Action for Education Leadership Project is a three-year initiative of the Wallace Foundation that provides grants to states and urban districts. Delaware's State Action for Education Leadership Project (SAELP), based in the Delaware Department of Education, focused on developing and supporting district-level initiatives for succession.

Financial support from the Wallace Foundation was used for the initial development phase of the work, with state and district funds used for long-term delivery of the training program. SAELP Project Director Jacquelyn Wilson explains SAELP's primary focus on long-term leadership growth this way: "Replacement means you can fill a specific position 'tomorrow.' Succession means that we develop people who could fill a variety of leadership positions in the long term."

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## IMPLEMENTATION DETAILS

Leadership succession activities will vary according to the level at which they are being implemented.

### School Level

Starting in March 2008, the incoming and outgoing principals of the New Orleans Charter Middle School met every two weeks to familiarize the new principal with the school, its students, and the community. During their first meeting, they made a list of the topics they wanted to cover, including a comprehensive tour of the facilities, the school's merit and demerit system, students' individualized education plans, teacher strengths and areas for growth, and the school's budget and strategic plans. At each meeting, the pair of principals targeted one area of school leadership.

Dusseault, the outgoing principal, involved the teaching staff in the leadership transition. She provided the staff with a comprehensive list of leadership responsibilities, and each teacher was asked to become an expert in a particular area. For example, one teacher became the point person for any questions about school culture and the systems available to support the high expectations inherent in the school's mission. Another teacher was responsible for communicating the details of the special education process.

Both principals attended meetings with each grade-level team of teachers, as well as several school-wide meetings with parents and families, to explain the transition. The two principals also spent time co-observing teachers and then discussing instructional goals for the upcoming year.

### Charter Management Organization Level

According to Dr. Kinghorn, Rose Management believes that the growth and leadership development of every individual are important to the long-term health of the schools and the CMO. Rather than finding the "right person" to fill a leadership position when it becomes available, Rose Management focuses on creating a shared



mindset of “big-picture” thinking skills, which includes abstract thinking, problem solving, goal creation, and effective skill set utilization in all staff members. When school leaders transition to other roles, the CMO then has an ample source of potential leaders who share a similar mindset and philosophy. Dr. Kinghorn explains that Rose Management believes in succession as a growth opportunity for individuals and as an essential part of the continuing viability of a school’s mission. “Growing leaders fulfills expectations of continuity, adaptation, and creative innovation for the future,” he says.

Rose Management uses self-evaluation as an important tool for individual growth. Rather than measure job compliance, the self-evaluation tools help staff understand whether they are reaching their objectives and problem-solving capabilities. Self-evaluation helps managers pinpoint areas of future growth to prepare for leadership transitions.

## State Level

SAELP staff first met with district representatives and discussed why each district needed to develop a succession plan. Districts and charter schools were invited to submit proposals outlining their district-wide succession plans, and a committee of state and district stakeholders awarded \$10,000 grants to successful applicants to support three years of planning. In 2002, eight districts and two charter schools were awarded grants. With support from the Delaware Department of Education, grant recipients developed a collaborative network, meeting bimonthly, participating in online discussion groups, and working with business partners to gather advice on leadership identification. While the plans of the districts and charter schools vary, the grant recipients share common goals to identify teachers with leadership potential, provide professional development, and prepare teachers to take on school leadership positions as they become available.

For example, Appoquinimink School District developed a three-tiered succession plan. In tier 1, the district identifies teachers with leadership potential to train as assistant principals for two years. In tier 2, the two strongest assistant principals are selected to enter a one-year principal internship program under which they visit all district schools. In tier 3, principals are selected to work in the district’s central office.

SAELP also focused on working with university credentialing programs in Delaware to redesign licensure programs for teachers entering into the succession planning program. The prospective administrators now take a six-credit course that involves 240 hours of clinical experience in an internship with a mentor principal, and they can also earn a salary increment of between 2 percent and 4 percent for five years by taking a skills and knowledge cluster. These professional development courses must be approved by the Professional Standards Board of the state education department. According to Gayle Rutter, Appoquinimink assistant principal, “the succession planning project, including an internship in each of the district’s schools, provided me with valuable on-the-job experiences. I have worked with a variety of school leaders and learned from each of them.”

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## IMPACT

The leadership succession efforts have proven successful in various ways.

## School Level

Outgoing New Orleans Charter Middle School Principal Dusseault reports that the new principal helped meet target enrollment numbers for the new grade configuration by September 2008, an indication that the leadership succession was successful. When the new principal began working full time in June 2008, she immediately began shaping the new direction of the school, founded on a strong base of institutional knowledge and staff support built from the previous months of meetings with the staff, students, and families and observations of the workings of the school.

## Charter Management Organization Level

To ensure that growth continuously occurs at all levels within the organization at Arizona’s Rose Management, teachers work in professional learning teams, collaborating with other teachers to improve instruction. Principals work with the Rose development team to ensure successful administrative practices are replicated. Participants have the opportunity to learn and grow at their own pace; for example, one individual began as a teacher, transitioned to lead teacher, and then moved on to become principal; this person is now working on the operation team of the



CMO. “Being part of the Rose team [enables] teachers to continue to grow professionally [and] personally [and offers them] opportunities to grow within the corporation itself. The development team in place here creates an atmosphere of creativity and inspires growth within the teacher individually, as well as among the team collectively,” reports John Sills, former lead English teacher and currently a principal internship participant at Mountain Rose Academy.

The Superintendent for Schools has been replaced through the succession grooming process, and succession grooming for the Chief Operating Officer is in process. Additionally, half a dozen principals are now in place through this internal process, and each school has at least two lead teachers who have moved up through the ranks.

## State Level

The overall state goal of the “Pool of 100” was met and surpassed; in fall 2008, an estimated 125 to 150 highly qualified candidates were eligible for open leadership positions. Between 2003 and 2007, the district placed nine aspiring school leaders in assistant or principal positions. Currently, SAELP, which is now called Delaware’s Cohesive Leadership System (DCLS), is working with eight districts and two charter schools to develop and support district-level succession plans.

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## LESSONS LEARNED

Implementation challenges and keys to success differ at each level and are tied to the approaches employed.

## Implementation Challenges

Implementation challenges included ensuring succession planning was a priority, was ongoing and system wide, and was sustained.

School Level. According to Bree Dusseault, everyone in the school community needs to see the transition as a priority and as important to the future well-being of the school and its students. Any missed meetings between the principals, for example, slowed the transfer of knowledge.

Charter Management Organization Level. The primary challenge is the change in mindset for staff, administration, and organizational leaders, according to Dr. Kinghorn. Instead of viewing leadership succession as a person-specific problem that happens when a leader leaves, succession planning must be ongoing and occur at a system-wide

level. CMO and school leadership must see the continuous development of the staff as integral to school success.

State Level. While the Wallace Foundation provided funding for the initial development of district and charter school succession plans, Delaware’s Cohesive Leadership System officials needed to ensure long-term sustainability for leadership succession planning when the grant ended. DCLS has begun to help districts identify existing state resources to support professional development, so work on leadership succession can continue once Wallace Foundation grant monies are no longer available.

DCLS also works to ensure districts do not develop too many leaders too quickly, causing an oversaturation of the pool of administrators. In addition, it continues to work with districts toward the goal of ensuring that the “Pool of 100” includes 25 percent minority candidates to increase diversity among the state’s education leaders.

## Keys to Success

Keys to success are tied to the leadership succession approaches used at the different levels.

School Level. Biweekly meetings during school hours between the outgoing and incoming principals of the New Orleans Charter Middle School were fundamental to the transmission of school information. It gave them an opportunity to communicate and to actively work together, touring classrooms, speaking with students, and co-observing teacher instruction. Creating a comprehensive list of all aspects of school leadership helped guide conversations, and involving teachers enabled the staff to continue sharing knowledge after Dusseault left. The new principal had spent considerable time at the school the year before, so she had developed relationships with the staff and within the school community.

Charter Management Organization Level. Staff development has been built into Rose Academies’ schedules and budgets. For example, the schools offer different in-service training programs, opportunities for administrative feedback, and collaboration among teachers during time set aside each week to work on leadership skills and build institutional knowledge.

All staff in the charter management organization and in the schools must agree that succession planning is a fundamental aspect of the school’s mission and that



each individual's growth is integral to the school's legacy, reports Dr. Kinghorn. Focusing on analysis, evaluation, and abstract thinking, rather than emphasizing specific work tasks, has helped Rose prepare for succession, according to Kinghorn. He credits the schools' success to the regulated, formalized, and consistent processes they have implemented.

State Level. With so much involvement by representatives from the state, school districts, charter schools, foundations, business sector, universities, and teachers unions, it is important to have a point person or team dedicated to coordinating and overseeing a leadership succession initiative, says SAELP Project Director Jacquelyn Wilson. Wilson suggests that this team should use available data to predict future leadership needs in order to motivate districts and schools to begin thinking about their succession plans. The work can be done through partnerships involving the state, districts, and charter schools. The state should not adopt a top-down approach nor impose a one-size-fits-all model. Instead, the districts and charter schools should be able to create and implement programs that suit their needs. The state can also arrange opportunities for districts and charter schools to share with others doing similar work during bimonthly meetings and discussions, creating a professional learning community. Through these programs, succession planning becomes imbedded in state and district practices for long-term sustainability.

## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

According to a report by the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, 362 new charter schools opened in the 2007–2008 school year, and each one needed a strong leadership team. Moreover, the existing 4,303 charter schools are constantly facing leadership openings as founders and other school leaders transition to other positions. Luckily, transition plans can be implemented effectively at different levels of the education system to support these needs.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

- Campbell, Christine, and Brock J. Grubb. *Closing the Skill Gap: New Options for Charter School Leadership Development*. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington, Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2008. Available at: [http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr\\_pubs/236](http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/236)
- Delaware's State Action for Education Leadership Project. "Succession Planning." Available at: <http://saelp.doe.k12.de.us/projects/sp/sp.html>
- Fulmer, R. "Keys to Best Practices of Succession Management." *Human Resources* (2005). Available at: <http://www.humanresourcesmagazine.com.au/articles/DD/0C02A0DD.asp?Type=60&Category=919>
- National Alliance of Public Charter Schools. "Growth and Quality in the Charter School Movement: 2008 Dashboard." Available at: [http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/file\\_Charter\\_Dashboard\\_2008.pdf](http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/file_Charter_Dashboard_2008.pdf)
- Rose Management. Publications and presentations on leadership succession. Available at: <http://www.rosemanagement.com/ROSELearningCommunity.html>

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This Profile is one in a series highlighting promising practices in charter school finance and governance implemented by state policymakers, charter authorizers, and charter operators across the country. This Profile was written by the Center on Educational Governance for the National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance (NRC). Promising practices are selected from nominations received by the NRC on the basis of innovativeness, evidence of positive impact, and potential for transferability and usefulness. The NRC has not conducted program evaluations of the initiatives profiled and does not endorse particular policies, practices, or programs. For more information on this Profile, please contact the Center on Educational Governance at (213) 740-0697.

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