What's the Board Got to Do With It?

The Role of the Charter School Board in Monitoring School Performance

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Introduction

Charter school boards play a vital role in ensuring the success of their charter school or Charter Management Organization (CMO).[1]

The board holds the charter, not the charter leader, and at the end of the day, the board is responsible for ensuring that the school/CMO fulfills its mission and goals in the charter.

Thus, hallmarks of high-performing charter schools include setting meaningful goals for the board and their organizations, monitoring progress towards these goals, and making data-driven decisions when performance is not on-track.

CHARTER LEADER

The term charter leader refers to the person at the top of the organizational chart who reports directly to the board. Leadership titles vary significantly across the charter sector (e.g., CEO, executive director, principal, school leader, head of school, school director, etc.) and can vary depending on the person leads a single-site charter or an extensive CMO. This paper uses the term charter leader for consistency.

Why do effective boards matter?

Ultimately, the success of the charter school or organization hinges on the board's ability to govern effectively. After all, the board

◖ Selects, supports, and when necessary, terminates the school leader;

◖ Partners with the school leader to define the mission and set the bar for academic excellence; and

◖ Ensures that the organization is operationally and financially viable.

For these reasons, board composition is highly critical. Prior research has found that effective boards typically range in size from 7 to 11 members for newer schools, and expanding from 11 to 15 members for more established schools.[2] Boards of this size can ensure that there is enough expertise, capacity, and diversity on the board without slowing down school governance.[3] However, there are no set rules for board size, and it is paramount to make sure that boards can still function effectively, regardless of size.

Not surprisingly, research has shown that when the board is weak (i.e., lacking capacity, overly reactive versus strategic, or out-of-touch with what's happening in the school and within the community), the school or organization is much more likely to show signs of distress.[4]

On the flip side, boards that are informed, engaged, and well-structured are much better equipped to spot concerns, anticipate shifts in the internal and external environment, and capitalize on opportunities for school/organizational improvement and/or growth.

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[1] CMOs are nonprofit, public entities that manage two or more charter schools.

[2] Cornell-Feist, 2015b

[3] Cannata et al., 2014

[4] National Charter School Resource Center, 2021

This resource

The purpose of this resource is to provide boards with a framework for effectively monitoring school performance.

❨ Section 1 will address what aspects of performance the board should monitor to ensure that their school/organization is on track. We'll discuss the board's contractual obligations, lagging and leading indicators, and data dashboards.

❨ Section 2 will discuss how boards can effectively monitor performance. Here, we'll unpack some of the structures, routines, and practices that effective boards use in close partnership with their school leader.

> But before we dive in, we want to highlight one more framing thought: **the board focuses on results, and the school leader focuses on the means to get results.** This is commonly referred to as governance versus management. While there is certainly overlap,
>
> • Governance is about serving as a strategic partner to the school leader by setting expectations, creating and maintaining the right conditions for success, and monitoring progress towards outcomes; and
>
> • Management is about executing the mission and vision by delivering academic excellence, operating the school/organization, and making the day-to-day decisions.
>
> It's essential to keep these distinctions in mind as we discuss the role of the board in performance monitoring.[5]
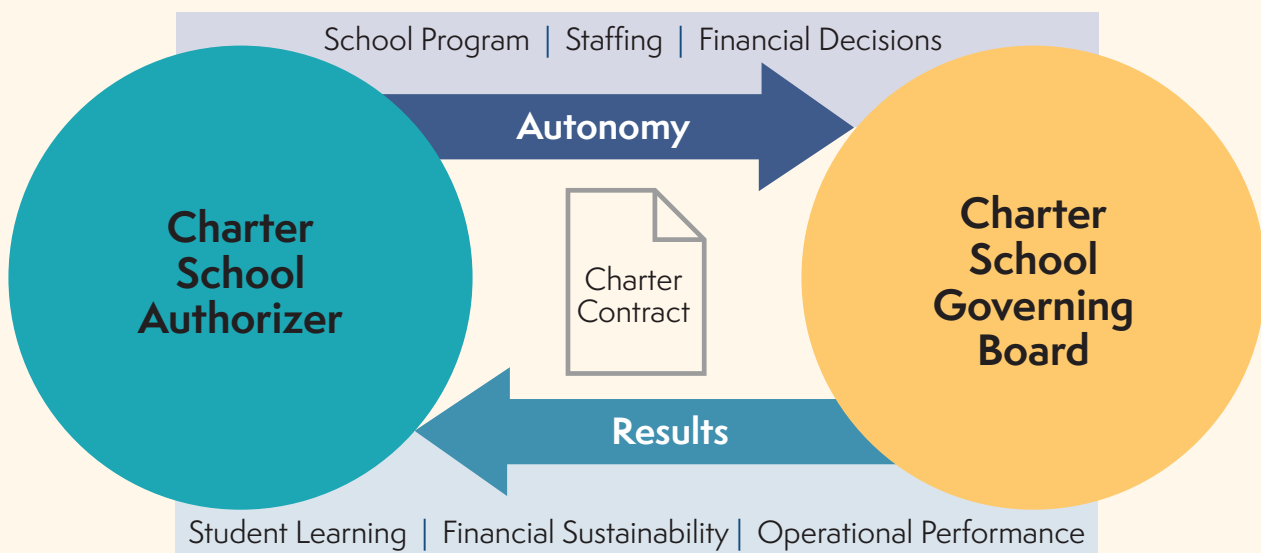
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[5] BoardOnTrack, 2018

What Aspects of Performance Should the Board Monitor?

One of the board's main duties is to monitor the organization's performance against stated goals, including the goals laid out in the charter application, the charter contract, and the annual board and school leader goals.

In most cases, the charter contract will specify the standards by which the school will be evaluated by its authorizer. Ideally, the contract will include an accountability plan or performance framework that, "define[s] clear, measurable, and attainable academic, financial, and organizational performance standards and targets that the school must meet as a condition of renewal."[6]

Herein lies "The Accountability—Autonomy Bargain," as depicted in Figure 1 below. Unlike a traditional public school district, where much of the decision-making and service delivery is centralized, charter schools/CMOs generally have autonomy over their academic, personnel, and financial decisions; and therefore, are held accountable for their student learning outcomes, operational performance, legal compliance, and financial sustainability.

Figure 1. The Accountability—Autonomy Bargain

School Program | Staffing | Financial Decisions

Autonomy

Charter School Authorizer

Charter Contract

Charter School Governing Board

Results

Student Learning | Financial Sustainability | Operational Performance

Source: BoardOnTrack.com

As a starting point, boards should review the academic, operational, and financial performance indicators found in their accountability plan. The plan will often include specific metrics and targets for goals like student achievement, student growth, legal compliance, and near- and long-term financial health.

At a bare minimum, the board needs to understand and monitor performance against these metrics. If the organization is unable to meet their contractual targets, the authorizer is highly likely to issue warnings or notices of concern, put the school/organization on probation, and/or revoke or non-renew the charter.

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6 National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2018

However, tracking progress against the accountability plan is not enough. Many of these metrics are measured on an annual basis and tend to be lagging indicators. Lagging indicators are essential because they confirm long-term performance trends and help organizations compare year-over-year performance; however, they do not predict trends well. As such, lagging indicators do not often illuminate what actions the board or organizational leadership should take in the near term.

Leading indicators, conversely, are a much better gauge of how the organization is performing in real time, as well as predictors of whether the organization is on track to meet the contractual accountability targets. As such, leading indicators are much more actionable for the board because they can reveal early warning signs of distress and provide opportunities for mitigation.

In addition, boards may feel that the unique mission of their school or organization is not reflected in the accountability plan, yet it is vital for success. For example, a school focused on over-age, under-credited students would likely consider credit recovery fundamental to its mission. As such, the board should track progress against mission-specific goals to ensure that the organization is fulfilling its purpose.

See the table below for examples of different types of measures to track.

Table 1. Lagging and Leading Indicators

	Academic	Operational	Financial	Mission-specific
Lagging Indicators	Proficiency on state tests, annual student growth, graduation rate	Legal compliance, annual audit	Annual fund balance	Student subgroup proficiency and growth
Leading Indicators	Interim assessments, student grades, or pass rates	Teacher retention and satisfaction, student retention, student/ parent satisfaction, student discipline	Current ratio, enrollment variance, days of cash-on-hand, monthly/quarterly fundraising goals	School culture/ climate, post-secondary readiness

Each of these categories—contractual obligations, leading indicators, and mission-specific—represent data that the board should have access to on a regular basis. Without this information, it's impossible for the board to support the school leader and make well-informed decisions.

Data Dashboard

So how does the board get started, and how does it know whether it is reviewing the right data?

As a first step, the board should adopt a standardized reporting tool, such as a data dashboard. As discussed so far, the dashboard should

- Include academic, operational, and financial performance metrics,
- Include mission-specific performance metrics (if desired or required),
- Align with the contractual accountability plan, and
- Include both lagging and leading indicators.

The board and the school leader should have a candid and transparent conversation up-front about what data to include in the dashboard. From there, the school leader can take the lead in drafting the actual tool.

The board and school leader should also have a candid conversation about expectations on managing the data dashboard. But, in general, the school leader and staff will be responsible for populating the data on a monthly basis, and the updated dashboard should be available for the board to review well in advance of the regular board meetings and relevant committee meetings. Likewise, board members must hold themselves accountable for reviewing data and preparing their questions or comments in advance of the board meeting.

State tests, charter school missions, and accountability plans vary significantly from state to state, so each dashboard will vary accordingly. However, a few things are universal to running a successful charter school, for example, student enrollment and teacher retention. The examples below showcase what a snippet of a board data dashboard might look like.

Table 2. Sample Dashboard

Student Enrollment

	Target	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
9th	125	140	127	125	125	123					
10th	100	94	95	95	96	96					
11th	90	88	91	91	91	91					
12th	–										
% Low Income	90	93	95	95	95	95					
% Students with Disabilities	14	8	7	7	6	6					
% English Language Learners	33	34	34	34	34	34					

Staffing

	Target	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun
Number of Teachers	16	16	15	16	16	14					
% People of Color	60	56	53	50	50	57					
% Teacher Attrition	<10	0	6	0	0	12					
Teacher Vacancies	0	0	1	0	0	2					

How Can Boards Effectively Monitor Performance?

While data collection is essential, it is just the first step. Boards also need to establish strong structures, routines, and norms for using data to inform decision-making.

Though board members are not involved in day-to-day operations, the board does have some levers for impacting organizational performance.

And it's important to note—the most effective boards understand that governance is a team sport—that is, they do their work in close partnership with the school leader by building trust and mutual accountability. If the board doesn't have a strong partnership with the school leader, it's impossible to govern effectively.[7]

Annual Goal-Setting

As we've discussed, the accountability plan spells out what the organization must deliver—academically, operationally, and financially—over the charter term. In most cases, this is a period of five years. And as we've noted, while these indicators are powerful, they are largely lagging indicators.

In most industries, work is driven by a set of annual goals, and these goals trickle down to department, team, and individual employee-level goals. Yet when it comes to charter school governance, boards often fail to identify annual goals for their organization, themselves, and their one direct report—the school leader.

As demonstrated in Figure 2 below, the process starts with a collective understanding of organizational priorities, which are the most important tasks the organization needs to complete for the year. From there, it's a cascading effect. Each of the two main partners—the board and the school leader—will identify how they will add value to the school or the organization in service of organizational priorities.

Figure 2. Breakdown of Priorities and Goals for Board and Staff
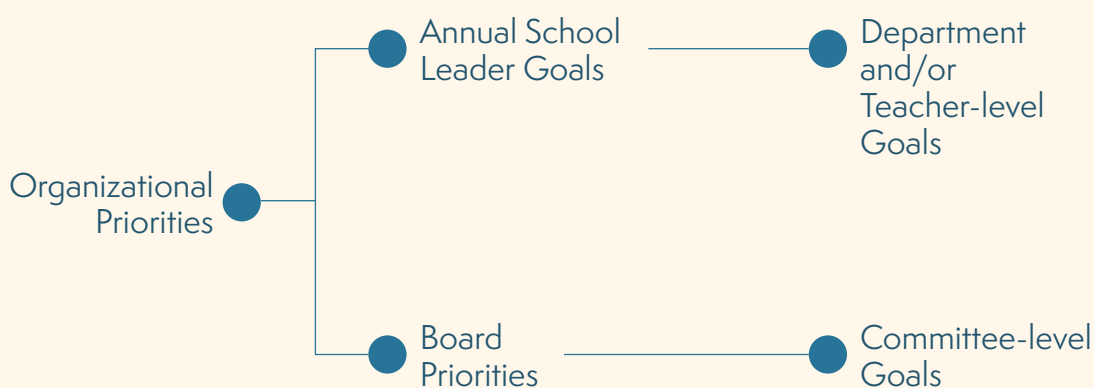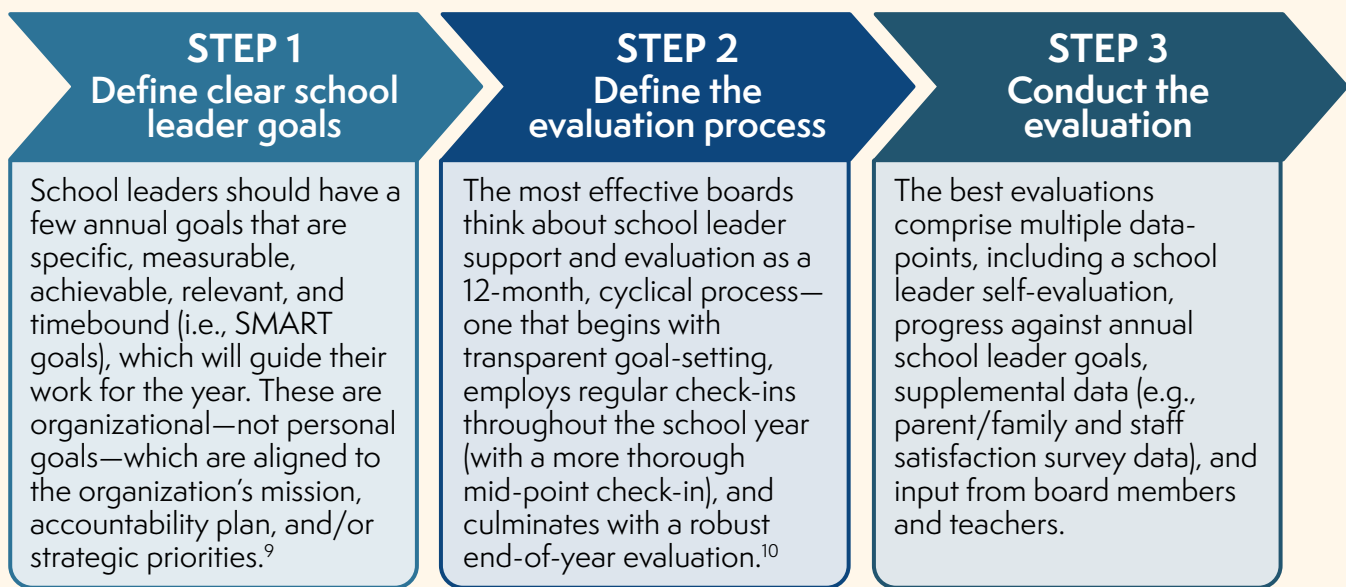

School Leader Support, Evaluation, and Goals

Evaluating the school leader is one of the board's main duties, and it is critical for board monitoring. Research indicates that conducting an annual evaluation is highly beneficial to both the board and the school leader. Specifically, conducting a consistent school leader evaluation leads to increased school leader satisfaction, a stronger board-school leader partnership, and reduced leadership churn. These factors significantly contribute to organizational health.[8]

Further, the school leader is the board's only direct report, and the effectiveness of the organization often hinges on the effectiveness of this one individual. School leader success equals school success, so failing to provide robust evaluation and support is more than a missed opportunity. A critical question that boards must answer is, "how can we measure and monitor effectiveness without first defining what it means to be effective?"

To answer this question, follow three key steps:

STEP 1 Define clear school leader goals	STEP 2 Define the evaluation process	STEP 3 Conduct the evaluation
School leaders should have a few annual goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timebound (i.e., SMART goals), which will guide their work for the year. These are organizational—not personal goals—which are aligned to the organization's mission, accountability plan, and/or strategic priorities.[9]	The most effective boards think about school leader support and evaluation as a 12-month, cyclical process— one that begins with transparent goal-setting, employs regular check-ins throughout the school year (with a more thorough mid-point check-in), and culminates with a robust end-of-year evaluation.[10]	The best evaluations comprise multiple data-points, including a school leader self-evaluation, progress against annual school leader goals, supplemental data (e.g., parent/family and staff satisfaction survey data), and input from board members and teachers.

Board Goals

Governance is a team sport. Just like the school leader, it's essential for the board to develop its own annual goals to help move the work of the organization forward.

For most boards, the required legal and compliance work, like an annual audit, always finds a way to get done. But, the more strategic efforts, such as leadership succession planning or organizational growth

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[8] BoardOnTrack, 2020b

[9] For help developing partnership objectives, check out the National Charter School Resource Center's SMART Objectives Toolkit, which combines planning principles with Charter School Program (CSP) grant requirements to guide current and prospective grantees in developing objectives and performance measures that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timebound (SMART).

[10] BoardOnTrack, 2019b

strategy, can fall off the radar. The work that truly makes the organization better—and makes an impact for students—only gets done when board members intentionally engage in setting and meeting goals.[11]

Having clear goals

◖ Empowers the board to focus on priorities and progress, not personalities and compliance;

◖ Ensures that the time spent in meetings is strategic and intentional; and

◖ Provides accountability, transparency, and confidence to key stakeholders.

Whether the board is going through the charter renewal process, communicating with the public, or making a case to potential funders, the board can demonstrate that the charter school or CMO is on track when the *goals* are on track.

Effective Committees

Committees are essential for effective governance; they are responsible for distilling the big issues, engaging in strategic dialogue, and making recommendations to the full board to help facilitate decision-making. Generally, BoardOnTrack recommends that every charter school board have five key committees: *academic excellence, finance, school leader support* and *evaluation, governance, and development (i.e., fundraising).*[12] The first two—specifically, academic excellence and finance—are most critical when it comes to monitoring performance.[13]

Both the academic and finance committees exist to monitor performance against stated goals. It is crucial these committees set and monitor progress towards goals that align with the authorizer's accountability framework as the charter's survival depends upon it. For the academic committee, this means measuring organizational outcomes against stated goals for metrics such as performance on state tests and interim assessments, student growth, student

WHO SHOULD SERVE ON THESE COMMITTEES?

• Every board member should serve on a committee, and ideally, no more than one committee at a time to minimize board member burnout.

• The finance committee should include the board treasurer and other board members with strong experience and expertise in finance, accounting, bookkeeping, financial policies and controls, and long-range budget planning/forecasting.

• The key functions of the academic committee include establishing a vision for excellence, helping the school leader to set ambitious goals, monitoring data to assess progress towards those goals, and educating the full board to conduct proper oversight of the academic program. While the academic committee should ideally include members with experience in K-12 education, (i.e., teaching and learning, curriculum, assessment, data analysis, etc.), it is not necessary for *all* members to have this expertise to be effective; the duties outlined above are often well met by people with strong analytical skills.[13]

• In addition to being racially and ethnically diverse, boards and committees should also reflect the backgrounds, values, and lived experiences of the communities they serve. Some schools reserve a parent seat(s) on the board, and/or strategically encourage parents with relevant expertise to participate in committees. Throughout, it is important that the board balances these selections by considering how including parents helps better center community voice in the school governance while also not hindering this process.

• In addition, organizations should bolster their committees with the appropriate staff members (e.g., the CFO or bookkeeper should serve on the finance committee), as well as non-board members who bring relevant expertise but may not be appropriate or able to serve in full board member capacity, (e.g., the principal of another charter school can be a huge asset on the academic committee).

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[11] BoardOnTrack, 2019c

[12] Cornell-Feist, 2015b

[13] Cornell-Feist, 2015b

attendance, and any mission-specific metrics. For the finance committee, this means measuring financial results against the budgeted goals.[14] Note, the academic committee often monitors operational metrics as well, such as family and staff satisfaction, school culture metrics, student discipline, and teacher retention, because these issues are so tied to student experience and outcomes. However, some boards may feel the need to have a standing human resources committee and/or task force to provide more targeted monitoring and counsel.

Effective Meetings

While effective committees are critical to effective governance, regular board meetings are also an important tool for monitoring organizational performance. It is incumbent upon all board members to ensure that meetings are effective, efficient, and purpose driven. As such, each board member has a duty to

◖ Review the data dashboard, committee reports, and related materials *prior* to the board meeting;

◖ Come prepared to dig deeper—raise concerns, engage in discussion, and acknowledge successes;

◖ Provide well-informed advice and considerations for the charter leader to consider; and

◖ Ask the tough questions!

Too often, board members without subject-matter expertise in K-12 education or finance will sit back during these conversations. They fail to realize that their expertise and diverse perspective are assets, and what they don't realize is that those closest to-the-ground or too well-versed in the subject may miss important gaps or trends. One of a board member's best tools is to ask, "Why?" and board members should use this tool frequently.

The most effective boards spend the majority of their time in meetings tackling strategic and forward-looking topics, versus reacting to things happening right now.[15]

RECAP

To recap, the board's role in monitoring performance is crucial for charter school success. When it comes to performance monitoring, the board—in close partnership with the school leader—is responsible for

• Setting the bar for performance;

• Establishing the systems, routines, and structures to monitor progress;

• Executing those systems, routines, and structures; and

• Taking action when the organization is not on track.

Figure 3 offers a visual summary of the board's monitoring activities throughout the school year. Here, it is important that boards align organizational priorities with the school or CMOs mission, its strategic priorities, and the authorizer's accountability framework.

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[14] Cornell-Feist, 2015b

[15] BoardOnTrack, 2019c

Figure 3. Summary of Annual Monitoring Activities

Annual Goals
- Establish organizational priorities
- Establish and/or update the data dashboard
- Set annual board goals
- Conduct annual school leadership goals
- Conduct annual school leadership evaluation

Quarterly Goals
- Check-in on progress against board goals
- Check-in on progress against school leadership goals, including mid-year evaluation

Monthly Goals
- Standing board meetings
- Standing committee meetings
- Ongoing monitoring via dashboard

Staying On Track

At the end of the day, data is only as useful as the actions it inspires. Even the most incredible data dashboard does not create an effective board.

If the right systems and routines are in place, the board has clear metrics and targets to measure performance, and the board has a strong, trusting relationship with the school leader, then conversations about performance are happening all the time, in a variety of settings. The board helps ensure that the organization is on track, and acts as a "brain trust" and sounding board for the school leader.

Yet, when the organization is not on track, here are some actions boards can take:

- Ensure school/organization leadership is aware of and acknowledges the problem;
- Request plans for corrective action and/or strategy;
- Review, discuss, and ensure that proposed plans and solutions are credible and realistic; and
- Help put realistic expectations and timelines in place to ensure progress.

The actions above largely mirror the actions an authorizer may take if they issue a warning or a notice of concern for a performance related issue. This is intentional, because as stated at the beginning: **the board focuses on results, and the school leader focuses on the means to get results**.

That said, the intersection of governance and management can be blurry. If the organization is struggling in a particular area or areas, the board may decide to "step up" and provide support beyond its traditional roles and responsibilities—often temporarily. For example, a board could decide to

- Leverage existing board committees or task forces or form new ones in response to the specific concern, (e.g., a marketing or communications committee could help mitigate a drop in student enrollment).
- Leverage external relationships (e.g., school board members, policy makers, charter school support organization, etc.) to advocate on behalf of the school and/or change unfavorable environmental factors impacting organizational performance.
- Leverage individual board member expertise to provide thought partnership to the school leader.
- Revisit monitoring practices internally or at the board level to ensure they are working effectively.

Conclusion

Charter school boards are more than just well-meaning volunteers. They have the tremendous responsibility of overseeing a multi-million dollar public entity. Even more importantly, they have the duty of ensuring that their organization keeps its promises to deliver exceptional results for students. Boards that are engaged, informed, and structured for success are in a much better position to ensure that the charter promises become a reality. By following these recommended practices and remaining diligent in meeting responsibilities, board members are positioned to help their school or CMO thrive while providing an exceptional education to the students they serve.

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