



## **Critical Success Factors in Charter School Restart** **Great MN Schools’ Criteria to Support Charter School Restart Efforts**

What follows is a definition and set of success factors that are applied as evaluative criteria by Great MN Schools in deciding whether to support a charter school restart effort. This document complements the related document, “Critical Success Factors in Charter School Turnaround”.

**Definition of Restart.** As the name implies, school restart involves starting anew. At its simplest, school restart keeps the students the same while changing the adults. It is an approach that includes disruption for the staff and board, but is designed to ensure that students can continue their education in the same space and that the school remains part of the fabric of a community. Among intervention approaches, restart involves greater change and thus greater risk, but also the potential for more rapid improvement. A school that does not implement significant changes to the staff, leadership, board of directors and program is not engaging in school restart. Other school improvement approaches such as turnaround or transformation involve less dramatic changes to the personnel and program.

**When is Restart Appropriate?** Since restart involves more substantive change than other school improvement approaches, it is most appropriate in situations where the current school has several years of low performance and/or is currently among the lowest performing schools in a region or area. The table below summarizes some of the differentiating considerations among closure, restart and turnaround.

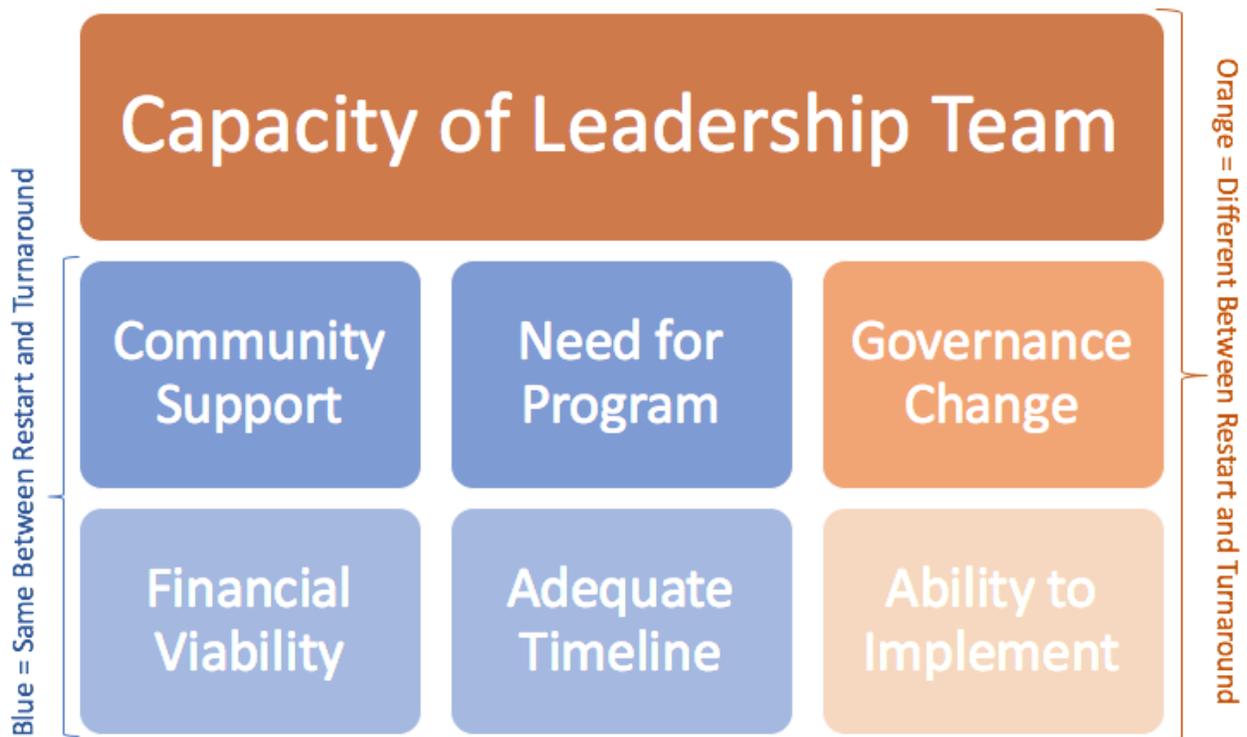
<b>Characteristic of Existing School</b>	<b>Closure</b>	<b>Restart</b>	<b>Turnaround</b>
Multiple years of low performance (e.g., 3+ years)	X	X	X
Consistent enrollment demand		X	X
Lack of high-performing nearby schools		X	X
Some aspect of academic performance is positive			X

In comparison to closure, restart is only a viable option when there is demonstrated demand for a school program at a specific location. If nearby



high performing schools have sufficient capacity to accommodate additional students, then serious consideration should be given towards closing the persistently low-performing school rather than taking the risk to restart it. If a school has mixed performance, with some strengths and some gaps, a school turnaround effort may be preferable to a full-scale restart (see further information in “Critical Success Factors in Charter School Turnaround”).

**Seven Critical Success Factors.** Based on available research and guidance in the field, Great MN Schools has identified the following factors and conditions that predict successful charter restart efforts. These critical success factors will be used to evaluate restart proposals and ultimately guide investment decisions for Great MN Schools. A graphic representation of the factors is as follows:



The graphic is shaded blue to indicate factors that are similar between restart and turnaround; for example, both require strong community support. The graphic is shaded orange in areas where a successful restart effort requires substantially unique conditions in comparison to turnaround. The rest of the



document explains these success factors and provides examples of how a restart initiative can demonstrate the conditions for success.

## **1. Capacity of Leadership Team**

If a school is going to make rapid gains on behalf of students, it is essential that the incoming team of educators has strong capacity, both in terms of their credentials and of the proven outcomes from the school program or educational approach. There needs to be a strong founding team and clear plans to recruit teachers. The school design must explain how the school will provide high quality teacher professional development, the systems for teacher/leader coaching and evaluation and the methods to address under-performance in staff. Capacity of the incoming team or operator can be confirmed through the following:

- The track record of the proposed operator in achieving strong outcomes with similar students
- A strong plan for hiring, coaching, developing and evaluating excellent teachers and leaders
- Oversight structures and capacity within the organization to support the proposed campus
- Direct experience scaling the educational organization
- Evidence or research to substantiate claims that the educational program is appropriate and effective with the specific students to be served

In addition to considering these attributes of the proposed team or organization that will lead the restart, Great MN Schools will seek to understand the overall due diligence process that was used to select this particular team or organization, including the quality review criteria used by the charter authorizer.

## **2. Community Support**

Parents and community members provide a vital role in our schools and it is critically important that they support the incoming team of educators and the selection of this team. Parent engagement and a strong parent-school partnership can have a strong positive impact on student outcomes. Evidence of community support can look like:

- Signed petitions, letters or emails of support from current parents and community members



- Intent to enroll forms
- Notes, attendance and agendas from meetings where parents discussed their desires for the restarted school and voiced support for the proposed school operator
- Evidence of clear communications that have been sent to all parents at the existing school and open invitations to these families to discuss future changes

There is not a set process to engage families but rather an expectation that this engagement occurs and that a majority of families are supportive of the intended change.

### **3. Need for Program**

For a restart to succeed, there must be a clear need for a continued school program in the specific location and serving the current students at the school. Without a clear and ongoing need for the school, parents and families are likely to leave the school and enroll elsewhere in the midst of the transition which in turn jeopardizes the viability of the restarted school. Ongoing need can be demonstrated by:

- Evidence that families cannot easily access alternate higher performing schools and information about the barriers to access
- Evidence that the school's target population is particularly unique and not currently served well by other schools

Given the existence of several high-quality schools in the Minneapolis area that are not yet full, it will be important for proposed restarts to demonstrate ongoing need as a critical success factor.

### **4. Governance Change**

In the Minnesota context, restarts are likely to involve an existing charter school that seeks a new operator or team of educators to take over the educational program. Where possible, this new operator should be overseen by a new board, or at least a substantially reconstituted board. Governance change can be evidenced by:



- Plan to apply for and receive a new charter contract for the incoming operator under a new board of directors, with the provision that the school can prioritize enrollment for the existing students
- Intentional changes to the membership of the board to bring in new talent and perspectives
- New oversight tools that focus on monitoring student outcomes, aligned to the performance expectations of the charter authorizer and state of Minnesota (e.g., new board data dashboard of student interim and summative results)
- Evidence that the existing board has dialogued with the broader school community (staff, parents and students) about the current performance of the school and the urgent need for fundamental changes that will better serve students
- Clarity about the division of duties and decision rights between the existing board and the future reconstituted or wholly new board
- Leadership at the board level in setting the stage for a constructive and collaborative conversation with families and the new operator

If the charter's board will have members that stay on through the transition to the new operator, it is critical that these members embrace the need for significant change and do not attempt to prescribe aspects of the program or approach to human capital, as noted in the section below concerning autonomy.

## **5. Financial Viability**

For restart to work, the future school must be financially viable. Financial viability is predicated on these factors:

- Sustained history of student enrollment and an alignment between the existing enrollment and future projections for enrollment with the new operator
- Existing balance sheet assets (e.g., cash, investments, furniture, fixtures & equipment) that will be put in service of the future program and operator
- Access to a quality facility at reasonable terms
- Financial projections for the new program that are not overly dependent on private philanthropy, particularly after the first two to three years of the restart effort

Financial viability is connected to the success factor, "Need for Program".



## 6. Adequate Timeline

Experience both locally and nationally supports the observation that schools need an adequate amount of time to plan for a proposed restart, while also thoughtfully engaging families and students in the planning process. Per national research, an ideal timeline will include several elements:

- Minimum 12 month total lead time before the new operator assumes control
- 2-3 months of a quality review process, whereby the charter authorizer confirms that the proposed school operator has the appropriate skills, credentials and track record to operate a quality charter school; this process can partially overlap with the community engagement steps noted in the next bullet
- 3-4 months of community engagement and dialogue between the existing families and proposed operator, before the operator is officially confirmed; this time should be utilized for families to understand more about the proposed program and for the operator to learn more about students' unique needs
- 7+ months of transition time, after a school operator has been officially confirmed and selected to plan and hire for the upcoming school year (e.g., from January to July prior to school opening in August)

In general, the restart planning process should start a year prior to the proposed opening date under the new operator.

## 7. Ability to Implement

By definition, a restart involves substantive changes in the management and staff at the school. For the incoming team or operator to function well, they must have the full autonomy over the following types of decisions and ability to implement their plans.

- Application and hiring procedures and decisions for all staff positions in the school
- Selection of curricular materials and assessment programs for the teachers and students to use
- Structure of the school day and school year, while considering input from families and students
- Definition of the expectations for staff, students and families as captured in documents like staff contracts and parent handbooks



- All other decisions necessary to run the school program on a day to day basis

Autonomy on the part of the operator is a shared value for all charter schools and a necessary component of a charter to charter restart.

*Great MN Schools would like to acknowledge EdPlex for drafting and preparing this document.*