



Guide to Evaluating Alternative Education Campus Application to Operate a New School

A-GAME (Advancing Great Authorizing and Modeling Excellence) is a group of nationally recognized public charter school authorizers committed to improving the way we measure the effectiveness of alternative education campuses. By focusing on these schools, often described as “dropout prevention” or “credit recovery” schools, this group of thought leaders is tackling the most pressing question facing authorizers today: How do you measure academic quality of schools designed to attract and engage students who, by definition, are disengaged and significantly behind in their learning?

The rubric below provides examples of how authorizers can rate applications to open an alternative charter school and is consistent with the guidance and recommendations put forth in the A-GAME’s [Measuring Quality: A Resource Guide for Authorizers and Alternative Schools](https://charterinstitute.org/a-game-grant/documents-deliverables) (charterinstitute.org/a-game-grant/documents-deliverables).

For the majority of a new school application, rating standards should be no different for an alternative charter school than they are for a non-alternative charter school. For example, criteria for assessing governing board policies, budgets, school day and year plans are no different for alternative schools. Thus, the rubric below is provided only for application elements that require a different lens when assessing the potential effectiveness of a proposed alternative charter. The omission of other elements, therefore, should not be taken to mean that they should be omitted in considering an application to open an alternative charter school.

School Overview			
ITEM	MEETS	PARTIALLY MEETS	DOES NOT MEET
Mission And Vision	Offers an ambitious and measurable view of how the school will enable its specific student population to gain the skills needed to succeed in both academic and non-academic areas.	Provides a mission and vision that are specific to the population served, but does not show how they can be measured. Or, the mission and vision do not include providing students the academic and/or social-emotional skills needed to succeed.	Offers a generic view that does not address the student population to be served with clear understanding or details; and/or cannot be measured
Educational Need of Target Student Population	Identifies the specific student population(s) to be educated and articulates how the students' needs are not currently being met, using reliable, valid data.	Identifies the student population(s) to be educated, but does not articulate how those students' needs are not being met reliable and valid data. Or, the case for the school is based on anecdotes.	Does not clearly identify the student population to be educated and does not show that this population's needs are not being met by current options.
	Addresses how the specific population will be recruited within the bounds of the charter school law and how they will ensure full enrollment needed for financial viability.	Does not demonstrate how the requisite number of students in the specific population will be successfully recruited to ensure financial viability through open-enrollment.	Fails to demonstrate how the recruitment process to attract the specific population of students will adhere to charter law's open-enrollment requirements
	Provides a clear explanation, that the reader can easily envision, of how the program will meet the needs of the target students population.	Provides a generic explanation of how the program will meet target populations' needs, but it is not fully developed.	Does not establish how the program will meet the target student populations' needs.
Community engagement	The applicant documents efforts to reach both the intended student population and community stakeholders, and provides evidence of positive reception, indicating need for the program.	The applicant provides documentation that efforts to reach stakeholder groups has begun, but either to a small group or reception has been a mix of positive and negative or indifference, making the need for the school difficult to determine	The applicant has made cursory or poorly-documented outreach efforts that do not establish support for the program and has an underdeveloped plan to conduct more meaningful community engagement.



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Leadership and Governance	Many of the proposed board members and school leader includes multiple members with a depth of experience working with the targeted population.	The board members have not proposed a prospective school leader and only one or two members have experience with the target population and the education model.	The applicant provides a list of founders and their resumes, but the overall group lacks deep experience with the target population and the school's proposed education model.
SMART Goals	Provides an accountability plan with SMART (specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic, and timely) goals that reflect the school's priority to advance students' academic and social-emotional development and to increase the likelihood of students' post-secondary success.	Provides an accountability plan with SMART (specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic, and timely) goals that reflect student outcomes on either academic growth or social-emotional development, but not both	Provides goals that are either not SMART or are SMART or do not reflect a priority on students' growth.
Assessments	Assessments are valid and reliable (as evidenced through validation studies) and selected for their alignment to the students' social-emotional and academic development, as well as the school's programming.	Assessments are valid and reliable but are not well aligned to students' social-emotional and/or academic development OR are not well aligned to the school's programming.	Assessments are not fully identified and/or have not undergone validity studies.
Accountability Plan Goals	The accountability plan clearly articulates which students are to be assessed and which student assessment outcomes will be included in the numerators and denominators for each measure.	The accountability plan contains many measures and specifies students but lacks detail and/or is confusing to the reader.	The accountability plan includes no mention of which students are to be assessed and does not specify which students will be included in the measure's numerator and denominator.



Educational Program Design and Capacity			
ITEM	MEETS	PARTIALLY MEETS	DOES NOT MEET
Philosophy	Explains the school's educational philosophy; describes the school model and primary instructional strategies; provides an overview of the proposed curriculum and a detailed first-year curriculum; provides an evidence-based rationale for these choices; and explains why they are well-suited for the anticipated student population.	Explains the school's educational philosophy, model, and instructional strategies but does not present a convincing, evidence-based rationale for why they are suited to the intended student population.	Does not provide a coherent educational philosophy or school model; OR presents off-the-shelf curriculum with no argument for its suitability with the intended student population; OR uses current educational jargon and "buzz words" without rationale or explanation.
Instructional Design	Includes a detailed discussion of how the curriculum, daily schedule, staffing plans, and support strategies and resources of the proposed educational plan will meet diverse needs of any populations, including both regular "subgroups" and the high-risk factors among the intended student population. [adapted from SCSCD]	Includes detailed discussion of the proposed educational plan but one or more elements (schedule, staffing, support strategies) are not well-aligned with needs of student populations or would not be sustainable over time for staff	Lacks one or more requested elements of the instructional plan OR includes two or more elements that are not well-aligned with needs of student population and would require highly skilled staff working many hours; or relies on unskilled staff to develop and implement sophisticated curriculum and instruction



Educational Program Design and Capacity

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Methods of Instruction and teacher Development	<p>Describes the methods, systems, and development teachers will have available for adapting curriculum and instruction to meet the needs of all students, including social-emotional needs.</p> <p>And ensures that teachers have the expertise, salary, and teaching schedule to allow for them to excel.</p>	Describes a cogent plan for teacher development but understates the time and resources required to meet needs of all students; and does not provide a teacher schedule that would attract the highest quality staff.	Displays little or no effort to support teacher development in meeting needs of all students and/or does not provide a plan for recruiting and keeping highly qualified staff.
Pupil performance standards	<p>Applicant presents skills and knowledge students are expected to master at each grade level and by graduation; notes how these may differ from regular state standards, how they were developed, and how they will be communicated to parents.</p> <p>OR, in a non-graded, mastery-based model, presents the skills and knowledge students are expected to master in each subject area prior to graduation and how mastery is determined.</p>	Applicant presents grade-level standards with no discussion of how these differ from state standards or why they are the same; if a non-graded model is proposed, expectations for mastery are not fully developed	Applicant presents state standards with limited details of how the target student population will meet them.
High School Course Offerings	Demonstrates how the accumulation of credit hours or competency/mastery units, certificates or other markers lead to a diploma and how students will be motivated to continue, even when academically behind their peers.	Provides a “typical” high school course sequence and credit attainment mode that does not address how students below in academic skill will access the grade-level.	Does not articulate how students below in skill level will earn credits and be prepared for graduation.



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Credit Attainment	Credit attainment takes into consideration students who will be behind in academic skills and/or high school credits and addresses their deficits while preparing students for post-secondary success.	Credit attainment does not explain how the program will motivate students to persist through high school to accumulate credits; and/or credit attainment is based on assessments that cannot be measured.	Unclear how students will show content area mastery to earn credits AND
Graduation Requirements	Graduation requirements clearly ensure student readiness for college or other postsecondary opportunities.	Graduation requirements meet or exceed traditional school requirements but course expectations are lowered.	Graduation requirements are poorly aligned with educational model of school OR fail to produce postsecondary readiness by graduation.
	Provides a clear definition of how graduation cohorts will be formed; whether and how it will prioritize 4-year cohorts over longer ones; and how it will deal with highly mobile students who will not be part of any standard cohort.	Provides plan for graduation cohorts beyond 4 years, but does not account for highly mobile students.	A four-year graduation cohort is the only option presented, without substantial argument for how highly at-risk students will succeed within that time frame
School Calendar and Schedule	Presents the annual schedule for academic and support programs that is compliant with state law (unless waived). Explains how this approach suits the needs of the student population. Explains how the day/week/year are structured to maximize learning opportunities for students who have not benefited from a conventional approach to learning time.	Presents the annual calendar and schedule for academic and support programs, but lacks a compelling rationale for why it suits the intended student population.	Uses the standard school year with no adaptation for student population or mission/vision



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School Culture	<p>Describes in detail the expectations, routines, rules, symbols, programs, responsible adults, and policies that will create a positive culture.</p> <p>Describes the research to support how the target population will positively respond to the structure.</p> <p>Explains how the adults will create a positive ethos and environment for success among the target student population.</p>	<p>Affirms the importance of a positive school culture and includes descriptions of programs it plans to employ, but lacks a convincing sense that all staff will be prepared to embrace and promote the intended school culture or research to support that the program will produce the intended results</p>	<p>Relies on adoption of a single program (e.g., RTI) as its understanding of culture.</p> <p>Does not provide research to support the intended impact for target population.</p>
Student Day Teacher Day	<p>Provides a “day in the life” of the school that gives clear examples of how a diverse student body will experience rigorous instruction, personal support, and positive peer culture in a variety of academic and non-academic activities.</p> <p>The scenario is rich with examples of how teachers and staff help students deal with the circumstances that may complicate their academic success and follows both staff and students through the day—showing how both will be set up for success</p>	<p>Describes a routine day but does not connect activities to the larger cultural themes presented in the narrative OR, lacks sufficient detail about dealing with student circumstances; OR, does not provide a clear picture of the experience from staff and student perspectives.</p>	<p>Does not include a “day in the life” or presents a formulaic routine that does not address student challenges and is not supported by the staffing model.</p>



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Supplemental programming	Presents a variety of programs that enrich students' learning experience and address the particular challenges they face. These may include conventional extracurriculars such as sports and the arts; summer or intersession learning; and programs or strategies that address students' mental, emotional, and social development and health. In addition to explaining why these particular programs suit the needs of students, the applicant explains how they will be scheduled, and how they will be financed if grant or philanthropic funding is required.	Presents a variety of activities likely to engage student interests, but does not offer a convincing rationale for how they respond to student needs and does not fully address the qualifications for staff providing this support	Provides cursory information about non-academic programming that does not have a logical connection to student needs; OR, presents a reasonably responsive program but fails to address scheduling, financing and staffing.
Student Recruitment and Enrollment	Explains how, where, and when the student body will be recruited, giving specific attention to how the school will follow or seek exception to conventional open-enrollment rules; how it will identify and solicit students who have dropped out; and how students (and/or families/guardians) in other special populations (incarcerated, receiving medical care, etc.) will be approached, including how the school will deal with referrals from courts or other custodial institutions, and whether/how a lottery will be conducted.	Describes a process for identifying and recruiting potential students who can enroll through conventional means (e.g. former dropouts returning to school.) However, provides little detail about how it will identify and enroll students in unconventional settings (e.g. shelters) or those referred by courts.	Describes a routine recruitment process that offers no detail about special populations.



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Student Motivation	Describes a coherent set of schoolwide policies and practices that seek to establish a safe and positive learning environment; deal fairly with infractions; and take into account the unique circumstances (including disability) that may have affected students' behavioral and disciplinary record.	Includes coherent discipline policies and practices, and is clear on procedures for students with disabilities; but does not include any relationship to counseling or other supportive practices for students with a history of behavioral issues.	The discipline plan is rote (e.g. simply adapting that of surrounding district) OR relies solely on punitive measures with no evidence of adaptation to needs of student population.
Educational Program Capacity	In addition to the usual listing of board, leadership and staff qualifications, the applicant provides clear criteria for the school leader's background and experience with the expected student populations; and names the individuals or external partners possessing specific skills and backgrounds needed to execute the school's unique design.	The application presents a strong capacity plan but one or two areas lack clarity about the personnel or skills needed to implement the school's design.	The program capacity plan either lacks overall strength OR fails to address the skill sets needed to execute the unique school design.



Operations Plan and Capacity			
ITEM	MEETS	PARTIALLY MEETS	DOES NOT MEET
<p>The Board: [Criteria are in addition to usual document submissions such as by-laws, grievance process, transition plans, etc.]</p>	<p>Application describes an overall governing philosophy and plan that will lead the school to educational, operational, and financial success, with cognizance of unique challenges facing student population. Describes formal or advisory strategies for stakeholders and partner groups to provide input to governing body.</p> <p>Presents a sound plan for periodic evaluation of school head. Explains how the board will conduct oversight of all school operations including instructional program and related supports. List of board members includes those with experience with issues faced by student population as well as plans for educating other members about those issues. If application is partnership with an existing nonprofit, it clearly delineates the respective roles of the new charter school's board and the existing nonprofit's board.</p>	<p>Application provides strong general governance strategy but board lacks depth in issues facing student population; OR the application lacks clarity on governance relationship between school and partner/founding nonprofit.</p>	<p>Application lacks essential submissions and fails to describe a competent governing strategy OR board lacks critical skills and experience OR fails to address specific needs of school design.</p>
<p>Program Evaluation</p>	<p>The application clearly describes how the school will evaluate progress of students, cohorts, and the school as a whole, including the role of assessments, non-standard measures (such as progress in treatment); and teacher input. Evaluates students against standards while also making appropriate comparisons to peer schools and students' own prior performance.</p>	<p>Applicant provides a sound evaluation plan for conventional measures but the plan for using and evaluating non-standard measures is not fully developed.</p>	<p>Applicant uses only conventional measures OR uses inappropriate comparisons for evaluating student performance.</p>



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School goal data	Explains who and how the school will collect and handle data; how they will monitor and reflect on data; and what corrective measures will be used if they falls short of goals.	The applicant clearly describes collection and handling of data but does not provide convincing plans for monitoring data or corrective measures.	The applicant does not indicate awareness of FERPA.

Financial Plan and Capacity			
ITEM	MEETS	PARTIALLY MEETS	DOES NOT MEET
Budget is designed for an Alternative Education Campus	Budget includes realistic estimates of current and 5-year revenue needs considering staffing and equipment required for extraordinary student needs.	Budget includes major elements but projections for one or two items are unrealistic.	Budget shows misunderstanding of basic revenue streams OR fails to indicate budgeting for extraordinary student needs.
Sustainability	Financial plan includes plans for obtaining all relevant revenue streams including public grants; explains how the school will establish strong financial controls to manage complex funds flow; and explains any need for additional philanthropy and presents plausible plan for obtaining it.	Financial plan is generally sound but relies too heavily on fundraising.	Financial plan dramatically understates revenue need over charter term to serve the intended student population.

