



# CEO Succession Planning Guide



NEW SCHOOLS  
FOR NEW ORLEANS

# Introduction

In the past two years, fourteen charter school boards have changed CEOs or Executive Directors, impacting approximately 18,500 New Orleans public school students—more than one-third of the city’s student population. Looking ahead, many founding CEOs hired ten or more years ago are preparing to retire or move on to other roles.

The task of choosing a CEO/Executive Director is arguably the most important responsibility of a charter board. National research shows that teacher turnover has a negative impact on student achievement,<sup>1</sup> and principals/school leaders are the key driver of whether teachers stay or go.<sup>2</sup> In New Orleans’ charter school system, CEOs/Executive Directors hire, manage, and support these principals and school leaders. Hiring the wrong CEO/Executive Director creates negative repercussions for schools, principals, teachers, and our students.



1. Ronfeldt, M., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2013). How teacher turnover harms student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 4-36.

2. Ladd, H. (2011). Teachers’ perceptions of their working conditions: How predictive of planned and actual teacher movement? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 33(2), 235-261.

NSNO reviewed every New Orleans charter school CEO/Executive Director transition in the past six years, conducting interviews with twenty-two individuals involved in these transitions. We learned that these high stakes leadership transitions are challenging, even under the best circumstances. In this process, a few common themes surfaced:

- Potential internal candidates among the charter organization’s leadership team are given little or no opportunity to learn and practice the skills necessary to be a CEO.
- The pool of local external candidates with a track record of success as a CEO/Executive Director willing to apply is small.
- National searches for CEO/Executive Director candidates are expensive, take longer than expected, and are often unfruitful.
- More often than not, the charter organization’s board never talked about CEO succession planning until it became an emergency.
- Many boards clashed during the search because they had not made a practice of necessary ongoing work, such as regular CEO evaluations, alignment on organizational goals and strategy, and engaging on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

Given these obstacles, many charter boards have struggled to hire a CEO/Executive Director with the requisite competencies and experience to be successful. However, boards can overcome these obstacles through the simple practice of regular CEO succession planning.

At NSNO, our mission is to deliver on the promise of excellent public schools for every child in New Orleans. To do this, we have developed a **CEO Succession Planning Toolkit** to support boards in developing and executing a plan for successful CEO successions. This **CEO Succession Planning Guide** serves as an overview and introduction to additional resources in the toolkit.



## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We use the term “CEO” in this guide to refer to every organization’s executive leader. This is the person hired by their organization’s charter board, whether their title is Executive Director, Head of School, or Chief Executive Officer. The recommendations in this guide are applicable to all charter school organizations, regardless of their size, composition of their leadership team, or title of their top leader.

# Executive Summary

Succession planning is ongoing planning throughout each CEO's tenure that considers evolving organizational strengths and weaknesses, individuals at all levels of the organization who show promise as leaders, and the incumbent CEO's planned timeline for departure (even if that timeline is not yet defined).

## STRONG SUCCESSION PLANNING IS:

- **Based upon a clear and communicated process and set of responsibilities.** Establishing a process and clarifying the responsibilities of all parties well before a transition begins provides efficiency and mitigates the possibility of conflict, duplication of efforts, and general confusion. Board members should determine and assign explicit responsibilities among themselves, as well as among staff.
- **An ongoing process from the beginning to the end of every CEO's tenure.** As an organization's strengths and weaknesses evolve over time, so should its succession plans. CEOs and boards should engage in succession planning regularly throughout every CEO's tenure so plans always reflect the organization's current conditions and pipeline of leaders.
- **Made up of best case scenario plans and emergency succession plans.** When succession planning, organizations should develop two specific plans. The first is an "Emergency Succession Plan," where a CEO or senior leader either gives less than one year's notice of their departure from the organization, or they are forced to leave unexpectedly due to termination, a severe illness, or death. This plan prepares an organization to immediately respond to the sudden loss of an internal leader with new, capable leadership on an interim or permanent basis. The second is a "Gradual CEO Succession Plan." This is the best case scenario, where a CEO or senior leader has given notice that they will leave an organization in one or two years. This plan prepares an organization for a smooth, strong transition to new leadership following a CEO's planned departure.
- **A reflection of the organization's current strategic priorities, strengths, and weaknesses.** Succession planning should reflect the strategic priorities, strengths, and weaknesses of the organization as they evolve over time. The conditions and needs of organizations are not stagnant, reinforcing the need for boards to regularly revisit succession plans, ensuring that they actually reflect organizational leadership needs at any given time.
- **A leadership development strategy.** Effective succession planning is an ongoing process by which the CEO and charter board collaborate to cultivate an internal talent pipeline. CEOs and their boards should engage in leadership talent development conversations with an eye toward developing leaders who could be viable CEO candidates in the short term, as well as identifying staff members who demonstrate long-term leadership potential. Further, boards and members of senior leadership (beyond the CEO) need regular opportunities to directly engage with each other. This enables boards to independently assess staff members' talents, rather than having to rely solely on the CEO's assessment of potential internal CEO candidates.
- **A gradual transition of CEO responsibilities.** Organizations can ensure smooth transitions and provide additional opportunities for talent development by incrementally sharing critical CEO functions with other members of senior leadership prior to a CEO's departure.

## SUCCESSION PLANNING IS NOT:

- **An event that occurs only when a CEO is leaving.** Succession planning that only occurs with the imminent (less than twelve months) or immediate departure of a CEO does not afford enough time to find a strong replacement. This approach can and likely will increase an organization’s risk of failure or, at least, dysfunction during the transition process.
- **Only for a CEO.** Organizations should engage in succession planning not just for their CEO, but for all leadership positions. While these resources focus on CEO succession planning, the recommendations are applicable to identifying and developing individuals with leadership potential at all levels so there is a deep “bench” of promising candidates at all levels of seniority.
- **Controlled by the CEO.** A charter school organization’s board holds sole responsibility and authority for naming a new CEO. It is wrong for any CEO to assume they can hand-pick their successor. While it should be done in collaboration with the incumbent CEO, succession planning requires independent thinking and leadership by board members.

*“This is about how the stability and progress of an organization impacts kids. Board members, you may have confidence in your current CEO, but thinking beyond any one person’s tenure is critical for how well we are able to serve students.”*

*Dr. Henderson Lewis, Jr., Superintendent of NOLA Public Schools*

# How to Develop a CEO Succession Plan

## STEP 1: BEGIN AN ANNUAL CEO SUCCESSION PLANNING PROCESS



**Articulate Roles and Responsibilities:** The Board, Succession Planning Committee, staff, and any third-party entities that the board engages must understand their collective succession planning responsibilities and individual roles in carrying out these responsibilities.



**Engage in Perpetual, Predictable Planning:** Begin succession planning at the start of a new leader's tenure. Define the steps that the Succession Planning Committee will take at least annually, calendar for meetings, and determine the materials needed at each one.

## STEP 2: ADOPT AN EMERGENCY SUCCESSION PLAN



Determine who, in the event of a departure with either short notice or in an emergency situation, will step in as the temporary or permanent leader. Boards can take this step immediately and revisit this plan annually.



### STEP 3: TAKE STOCK OF NECESSARY ONGOING BOARD PRACTICES

The practices below improve a board's ability to deliver on all of their governance responsibilities. Boards must take stock of whether they engage in these practices and, if not, establish systems to do so before gradual succession planning.



**Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Training/Reflect Upon Personal Biases:** The ability to note personal biases and the limitations of one's perspective is foundational in succession planning, as unspoken criteria springing from personal biases can lead to dysfunction and confusion in selecting a new leader.



**Understanding the Organization's Strategic Priorities, Strengths, and Weaknesses:** The board should have a clear understanding of the organization's strategic priorities, strategic plan, strengths, and weaknesses, as each of these inform the competencies and characteristics needed in a CEO.



**CEO Evaluations:** Boards should conduct a quality CEO evaluation process that is aligned with the organization's strategic priorities and seeks feedback from staff and other key stakeholders. This evaluation will serve as the foundation for defining the competencies/characteristics the board will seek in a new CEO.



**Leadership Development Priorities:** The board is responsible for holding the CEO accountable for progress towards staff leadership development goals that work to build the existing internal bench of potential future CEO candidates.

### STEP 4: PREPARE FOR A GRADUAL CEO SUCCESSION



Boards and CEOs should have regular, honest conversations about the duration of the CEO's tenure. Even if the board and CEO have no plans to make a change in CEO leadership for many years, the board should develop a timeline and process for how they will address the CEO's eventual departure.

The remainder of this guide examines each of these steps in greater detail. To make the best use of these resources, we recommend that boards review this guide in its entirety first. Then, boards should complete *The CEO Succession Planning Workbook*, available on NSNO's website. The *CEO Succession Planning Workbook* should be reviewed and updated annually, as staff and organizational needs evolve over time.

# Begin an Annual CEO Succession Planning Process



## ARTICULATE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Establishing the responsibilities of all parties long before a transition begins provides efficiency and mitigates the possibility of unproductive conflicts, duplication of efforts, and general confusion. Ultimately, the authority to set the rules of the succession process lies with the board, but it is important that this framework is communicated to all interested parties.

Below is a table of recommended actors and roles. The **CEO Succession Planning Workbook** provides greater detail on the specific responsibilities of each role.

<b>Board of Directors /Charter Board</b>	The charter board is ultimately responsible for all CEO succession work.
<b>Succession Planning Leader</b>	This is a board member designated by the full board to ensure the board carries out all of its responsibilities related to succession planning. Ideally, this is someone who has experience with leadership succession planning and human resources work, and appreciates the sensitivity and importance of these discussions. As a general rule, the designated Succession Planning Leader should not be the board chair to facilitate more active engagement and create space for differing viewpoints among members.
<b>Succession Committee(s)</b>	The succession committee is a charter board committee that executes CEO succession planning.
<b>Incumbent CEO</b>	The organization's current CEO must develop and prepare internal talent for emergency and gradual CEO successions.
<b>Interim CEO</b>	The Interim CEO leads the organization in the event of an unplanned or emergency transition (e.g. departure that occurs less than twelve months after the board is notified), or if the CEO is removed from office.
<b>Senior staff and other key staff</b>	Roles and responsibilities will vary depending on the organization; but, staff should be well informed about what role they play and, importantly, do not play, in a CEO transition.
<b>Key organization stakeholders</b>	In certain instances, boards have found it helpful to include key stakeholders (outside of the board and staff) in the transition process. This involvement should be limited and clearly defined in a predetermined framework.





## ENGAGE IN PERPETUAL, PREDICTABLE PLANNING

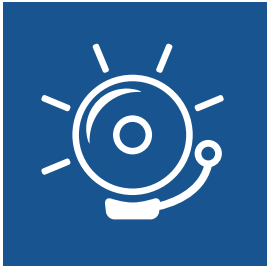
A board can ensure that succession planning is a predictable, perpetual practice by doing the following:

1. **Start succession planning as soon possible.** Boards should take up succession planning as soon as possible, regardless of how long their current CEOs have been with their organizations. Organizations are more likely to avoid the topic of succession planning altogether the longer into a leader's tenure they put off discussing it. For new CEOs, succession planning should begin within the first few months of the new CEO's tenure. This will turn succession planning into a habit, which is also beneficial to board members who must familiarize themselves with the process as board membership changes over time.
2. **Set a time and a place for recurring discussions around succession planning.** It is a best practice for boards to set succession planning as an annual agenda item for the succession committee and the board. This solidifies an official time and place for key stakeholders to spend meaningful time discussing a CEO's tenure, steps for a planned succession if that CEO has a timeline for departure, and steps for responding to an emergency CEO departure.
3. **Normalize the conversation about succession planning.** If succession planning is brought up unexpectedly, CEOs and/or senior leadership may feel that their jobs are in jeopardy, causing an unnecessarily strained and awkward planning process. By introducing succession planning at the beginning of a CEO's tenure and maintaining a predictable planning cycle, CEOs can be discerning, clear-headed voices in those discussions.

*"Having just experienced a leadership transition myself, I made sure that one of my first steps as a new CEO was to support the board in establishing a succession plan. This is something that is easy to put off since other things can feel more urgent but it is too important to not address regularly."*

*Sabrina Pence, CEO of FirstLine Schools*

# Adopt an Emergency Succession Plan



## WHAT CONSTITUTES AN EMERGENCY SUCCESSION?

Any instance in which the CEO departs with twelve or fewer months of notice, including circumstances in which the CEO resigns, dies, departs immediately due to an illness and/or an emergency, or if the board immediately terminates the CEO.

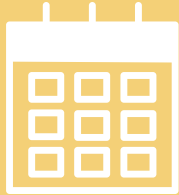
Emergency succession planning is an opportunity for boards to assess the organization's pipeline of talent, as well as the competencies and characteristics required in a leader. Furthermore, emergency succession planning is a critical element of risk management for organizations.

An emergency CEO succession plan should include the following components:

1. **Responsibilities of the incumbent CEO:** The board should work annually with the current CEO to take inventory of and list their key responsibilities so that in the event of an emergency, an Interim CEO is able to continue all critical work.
2. **Named interim and/or permanent leader:** Unless there is someone the board could reasonably consider as a permanent CEO candidate, the board will likely need to name an Interim CEO to serve immediately following the outgoing CEO's departure. The board should seek input from the current CEO and other members of senior staff to determine the named interim leader. The board must then seek this person's permission to include them as the Interim CEO in case of an emergency succession and must revisit this choice on an annual basis.
3. **Temporary changes in leadership and responsibilities:** Of the CEO's key responsibilities, there are some that other members of the senior staff may be better suited to perform on a temporary basis than the Interim CEO. Further, the individual that the board designates as the Interim CEO may need to shed some of their responsibilities in order to take on CEO responsibilities. For these reasons, the board must work with the current CEO to map out not only the Interim CEO's responsibilities, but also how an emergency succession would impact all other senior leaders.
4. **Planned communications:** The board should map out and regularly revisit communications that must occur in the case of an emergency CEO succession. This includes designating a board member who will contact the Interim CEO as well as the communications that will go out to staff, families, and key stakeholders.

*"What I know for sure is that boards and top executives need to have emergency and defined succession planning conversations well in advance, when heads are cool."*

*Latoye Brown, CEO of Audubon Schools*



## A NOTE ON TEMPORARY LEAVE

Emergency succession plans also serve as the playbook for periods during which a CEO must take temporary leave for any reason. If the CEO goes on maternity/paternity leave, becomes ill, or has a family member who becomes ill, for example, this is the plan that the board will implement to ensure that another leader within the organization is able to carry out the CEO's responsibilities during that time. Furthermore, individuals planning to have children may hesitate to take on CEO positions if the organization does not have a demonstrated commitment to supporting temporary leaves of absence for CEO leaders, further limiting an already shallow talent pool. The board is responsible not only for selecting the CEO, but also for ensuring that the CEO has the support that they need for their job to be sustainable, and temporary leave plans can help with this.



# Take Stock of Necessary Ongoing Board Practices

The practices below improve a board's ability to deliver on all of their governance responsibilities, and are a prerequisite foundation for effective succession planning. Boards should take stock of whether they engage in these practices and, if not, establish systems to do so prior to gradual succession planning.



## DEI TRAINING/REFLECT ON PERSONAL BIASES

Boards typically consist of individuals with varying personal and professional identities and backgrounds that can inform individual biases, preferences, and concerns. Organizations frequently find that challenging successions result from board members evaluating candidates based upon unspoken and differing criteria.

To mitigate this, boards should:

1. **Regularly engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion training.** Implicit bias regarding race, gender, and other factors is problematic. If your board has never engaged in trainings and/or facilitated conversations around biases and privilege, it should do so on a regular basis to ensure that the board works from a place of fidelity when evaluating candidates of varying races, genders, other identities, and backgrounds. Beyond succession planning, all New Orleans schools serve mostly minority or diverse populations, and a board is doing a disservice to its students if it does not take this seriously.
2. **Go through a process of airing biases, preferences, and concerns.** Boards should take the opportunity to reflect upon and voice any personal concerns, preferences, or biases that may influence their views regarding the best candidate. This makes everyone aware of unspoken criteria that some may be evaluating candidates against, especially when they have nothing to do with candidates' actual capabilities. For example, organizations tend to overemphasize a candidate's age, where they went to college or graduate school, what degrees they earned, whether they need to relocate, or commuting length for the job. These variables do not correlate with performance, and boards should not consider them to be as important as performance-based qualifications.
3. **Understand the unique competencies and skills required of a charter school organization CEO.** While there are some competencies and skills that would enable a CEO to succeed in leading any organization or business, many are uniquely necessary in CEOs of charter school organizations. NSNO and Bellwether Education Partners have created a tool that details the critical competencies of a New Orleans charter school CEO, which can be found in NSNO's *CEO Succession Planning Toolkit* on [www.newschoolsforneworleans.org](http://www.newschoolsforneworleans.org).
4. **Apply scrutiny to shiny pennies.** Boards should not immediately default to naming a charismatic candidate as their organization's next CEO. It is important to recognize that people can pose as superficially polished or overly charismatic, particularly if someone is coming from a place outside of the organization.
5. **Be open to candidates with major strengths and weaknesses.** It is important for boards to maintain an open mind when evaluating CEO candidates. A person who has major strengths but does not check all of the boxes on the list of ideal qualifications could still be the best candidate to lead the organization. The strengths may

be exactly what is needed to achieve the organization's vision and strategic goals, while weaknesses or gaps in experience can be mitigated through coaching or investment in additional staff support.

6. **Consider involving a third-party to facilitate ongoing planning, support discussion, and mediate conflicting opinions.** While boards are fully authorized to carry out the process of naming a new CEO on their own, some organizations find that having a third-party facilitator helps the board to implement these practices. Further, a third-party facilitator can provide an objective perspective.



## UNDERSTAND THE ORGANIZATION'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES, STRENGTHS, AND WEAKNESSES

Many failed or painful CEO transitions are the result of misalignment of board members, staff, and stakeholders on the organization's current strengths, weaknesses, and strategy. In particular, leadership selections that inadvertently become a proxy battle over vision and strategy result in long-term harm to the organizations they are intended to benefit. Competing views on what is most important for the organization can make it difficult for board members to agree on the best candidate.

Before seeking a replacement for an incumbent, it is critical that the board agrees upon the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks facing the organization. Board alignment on short- and long-term priorities can then inform experiences, competencies, and personal traits required in the next CEO. Organizations that have clear, strategic direction can determine what a future leader should look like in terms of the experience and skills they must possess to take the organization from its current state to the achievement of future goals. Boards and CEOs should rigorously evaluate organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks on a regular basis – before any planned or unplanned succession is announced. In doing so, boards and CEOs should take the opportunity to draft a CEO profile that can serve as a blueprint for evaluating future CEO candidates.



## IMPLEMENT A CEO EVALUATION SYSTEM

Identifying and celebrating a CEO's wins and providing clear, honest feedback about their growth opportunities is essential to the success of the CEO and the charter school organization. Much of the information that comes from a CEO evaluation is critical to effective succession planning.

An effective CEO evaluation system should:

1. **Make roles, responsibilities, and routines explicit.** As is true of succession planning, the board should identify an individual on the board who is responsible for leading a designated committee to conduct the annual CEO evaluation.
2. **Seek input from members of the senior leadership team.** A board that relies solely on the CEO to understand how the organization functions does not have a complete or accurate picture, and is unable to conduct an accurate evaluation of the CEO. Boards should incorporate interviews with members of the senior leadership staff to have a more nuanced, comprehensive understanding of the organization and how it can improve.
3. **Include metrics for leadership development within the organization.** The board should hold the CEO accountable for setting and meeting goals related to leadership development across their staff. This information from the CEO evaluation will be a critical component of succession planning.
4. **Incorporate a self evaluation.** The individual responsible for leading CEO evaluations should begin each evaluation by asking the CEO to complete a self assessment. This should include: a review of wins relative

to their goals and objectives for the previous year; ways in which they can improve their performance as CEO; recommended goals and objectives for their performance for the coming year; and the supports that they require to meet those goals and objectives.

5. **Routinely consider what the CEO can delegate.** Part of effective succession planning is lengthening the tenure of strong CEOs by ensuring they have the support and resources necessary for their job to be sustainable. Leaders across New Orleans report burnout, exhaustion, and over-commitment as factors that would lead them to consider a shorter tenure. On the other hand, CEOs with a senior leadership team that shared portions of the CEO's executive responsibilities found their job to be more sustainable, allowing them to more effectively lead the organization while cultivating a deeper bench of highly capable staff. CEO evaluations afford opportunities to have open, honest discussions with the CEO about support they require and opportunities for delegation as a form of leadership development.
6. **Revisit compensation at each evaluation.** The board should regularly revisit the CEO's compensation to ensure a clear understanding of market salary rates; this information is critical in succession planning. Further, this is another lever for retention of current CEOs.

*"We look comprehensively at the set of skills needed not just in the CEO, but across our leadership team. That allows us to have a better understanding of internal candidates who could succeed in the CEO role — because any CEO's success also depends on the strengths of the rest of the leadership team."*

*Rhonda Kalifey-Aluise, CEO of KIPP New Orleans*



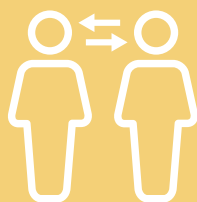
## LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

The board must ensure their CEO is actively developing their leadership team with an eye toward creating an internal bench of potential future CEO candidates. Below are a few strategies the CEO and board can work together on to accomplish this.

1. **Make your organization's strategic priorities known.** CEOs should be transparent in sharing organizational goals with staff members. Including senior leaders, directors, and managers in strategy conversations will help them acquire planning and leadership skills, as well as a big picture understanding of the organization and its objectives. This will serve a board and an outgoing CEO in succession planning because internal CEO candidates will already have experience with developing and implementing their organization's vision and strategic priorities.
2. **Hire a search firm to recruit top talent for senior leadership roles, other than the CEO.** In a role as specialized as leading a charter school organization, organizations often struggle to successfully recruit external talent for the CEO position. It is imperative that boards hold CEOs accountable for cultivating an internal pipeline of successors, as a strong internal hire is more likely to succeed than an external hire.

Organizations can bolster the talent pipeline by hiring a search firm to recruit for senior leadership positions other than the CEO, such as Chief Operating Officer, Chief Finance Officer, or Chief Development Officer. These recruits then have opportunities to learn about the organization over a longer period of time, while increasing the internal pipeline of potential CEO candidates.

3. **Provide training and opportunities for professional growth to members of the staff.** As CEOs identify potential future leaders within their organization, they should provide those individuals with professional growth opportunities. This should include coaching or mentoring programs, cross-training initiatives<sup>1</sup> that provide leaders with exposure to projects outside of their usual domain, and external professional development. These types of programs are investments in the organization's future, as they provide employees with opportunities to work at the next level of seniority. Throughout their tenure, CEOs should actively identify individuals in their organization who are qualified to take advantage of such opportunities.
4. **Keep the board informed of staff members who are high-performing.** Boards are responsible for holding CEOs accountable regarding updates on talent development within the organization. They should require regular updates that maintain a flow of information between CEOs and board members about current and future leaders within the organization.
5. **Create opportunities for the board to interact with senior leaders outside of the CEO.** Too often, the CEO is the only staff member with whom the board regularly interacts. This could make it difficult for board members to independently assess whether an internal staff member would be a strong CEO candidate.
6. **Perform a trial run of succession plans.** A CEO's extended vacation, maternity/paternity leave, or sabbatical is a great time for CEOs to temporarily pass off executive responsibilities to potential successors. The employees that take on the additional workload will gain experience, and the CEO can evaluate how well they are prepared to take on a bigger role in the future.



## BOARD & SENIOR STAFF ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

- Ask members of senior staff to lead and facilitate board committees or subcommittees related to their respective leadership domains. For example, ask your Chief Academic Officer to manage your board's Academic Committee meetings.
- Ask members of senior staff to present updates to the entire board on their respective areas of responsibility.
- Ask members of senior staff to collaborate with board members on board-led initiatives, such as fundraisers or event planning.
- Ensure that board members seek input from staff members when assessing organizational strengths and weaknesses, as well as conducting strategic planning.

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1. Your CAO, for example, should have opportunities to lead projects outside of the academic domain. They will be a less viable CEO candidate if they have never demonstrated their capacity in other areas of the CEO's responsibilities. Many refer to this as "cross training."

# Prepare for a Gradual CEO Succession



Even if the board and CEO have no plans to make a change in CEO leadership for many years, the board should develop a timeline and process for how they will address the CEO's eventual departure.

All CEOs eventually leave their organizations, so boards must be prepared for these inevitable departures. Much of the work necessary to facilitate a successful, gradual succession process must happen many years before the board and CEO know when the CEO plans to leave.

Boards should develop a gradual CEO succession plan that addresses each of the practices below; these practices should be reviewed and updated annually during the board's dedicated annual succession planning process.

1. **Checking in with the CEO:** While this seems like a given, many boards actively avoid asking their CEO the simple, direct question of whether they have decided upon a departure time frame. Even if the CEO can only be as specific as saying they have determined the broad window during which they will depart (e.g., 5-10 years), that is still critical information for the board's ability to effectively plan.
2. **Notification timeline:** The board and CEO must agree to a timeline in which the CEO will notify the board if they plan to leave the organization. At a minimum, the CEO should plan to inform the board twelve months in advance of departure—anything shorter should be considered an emergency succession. Ideally, the board will have a sense of the CEO's intended departure time frame several years in advance.
3. **Transition timeline:** The board and CEO must define the outgoing CEO's responsibilities following the board's selection of a new CEO. Regardless of whether the board selects an internal or an external candidate, the outgoing CEO should commit in advance to a period of time in which they are available to both the new CEO and the board to support the new CEO's onboarding. While this can be considerably less time for an internal candidate, a new CEO who was an external candidate should have regular communication with the outgoing CEO for at least three months following the new CEO's start date.
4. **Offloading CEO responsibilities:** This goes hand-in-hand with CEO Evaluations; but, the board and CEO should collaborate to maintain a current and detailed list of the CEO's responsibilities at all times. The board and CEO should use this to roughly plan for how the CEO will begin to immediately offload key responsibilities when the board selects a new CEO.
5. **Developing talent towards the end of a CEO's tenure:** As CEOs approach the end of their tenure, they must carry out the final critical steps of talent development that support succession planning. These steps will vary, depending on how much time CEOs have before leaving an organization.
  - When a CEO knows they will be leaving an organization in the next one or two years, they must start delegating executive functions to senior staff members. In interviews we conducted, charter school leaders suggested this "passing off" of responsibilities should account for no more than 10% of an outgoing CEO's time when they are around the two-year mark before a planned departure. Over time, they should increase the number of duties transitioned to senior staff members. This gives internal staff members an opportunity to grow and prove their standing as viable CEO candidates when the time is right.



- A CEO leaving on a shorter timeline must accelerate delegating duties to potential internal candidates; the key, however, is to share responsibilities incrementally. Because the time frame to transition executive responsibilities is limited, the CEO must work more closely with those individuals to set them up for success. An outgoing CEO should focus on reassigning their most critical roles and responsibilities, finally committing to letting their team take charge without interference.

*“Boards need to discuss the bench of talent on an ongoing basis – even when they do not know when their top executive is leaving. Developing local talent benefits CMOs so much more than relying on national recruits.”*

*Kevin Gutierrez, Governance Director for Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools*

## COMMON PITFALLS IN SUCCESSION PLANNING

Interviews with local charter organizations and national research identify several common challenges in CEO succession planning:

- **Lack of advance planning or failing to think ahead:** Too often, organizations get caught up in the day-to-day work of running a charter school or network, putting off necessary conversations around succession planning. They put themselves at risk of being in a vulnerable position if their CEO leaves and takes important organizational information with them without a comprehensive transition plan. Boards must adopt the mindset that succession planning is a priority, as well as an ongoing process. In doing so, organizations will always be prepared for a CEO departure.
- **Not treating talent development as something that concerns a board:** While boards and CEOs have separate, respective roles in governing versus managing an organization, there are overlapping areas of involvement, such as talent development. A CEO and board members may decline to discuss talent development because they incorrectly perceive it as something solely within the CEO’s realm of managing the organization. Instead, boards must be informed of talent development initiatives and understand how staff members are performing to best evaluate the capacity of current and future leaders within their organization as potential CEO candidates.
- **Ignoring internal dynamics:** Boards must use their professional judgment to name the best possible candidate for the CEO role. Ideally, any individual who is not selected for the position understands it is because they were not the best candidate. However, this is not always the case. Too often, there is a certain dynamic or “politics” that creates internal drama after a new CEO is named. Someone within the organization feels unfairly evaluated, or, several people within the organization feel that the person who is named as next CEO does not deserve the role. Outgoing CEOs are primarily responsible for evaluating the internal dynamics of their organization and mitigating personnel conflicts that challenge succession plans. Boards should also make a point to follow up with internal staff members who formally apply for the CEO role and do not get the position.

# How to Begin CEO Succession Planning

Before undertaking the steps detailed in this guide, we recommend that charter boards visit [www.newschoolsforneworleans.org](http://www.newschoolsforneworleans.org) to review and access NSNO's **CEO Succession Planning Toolkit**, which includes:

## CEO Succession Planning Toolkit

### CEO SUCCESSION PLANNING GUIDE

Comprehensive guide that includes detailed information on best practices and steps every charter board should take to develop CEO succession plans

### CEO SUCCESSION PLANNING WORKBOOK

Modifiable document that translates the CEO Succession Planning Guide into actual practice for boards through a board self-assessment, planning prompts, and sample planning documents

### CEO PROFILE & CEO PLAYBOOK

Resource developed in partnership with Bellwether Education Partners to detail the profile and competencies of successful New Orleans charter organization CEOs

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Articles and research
- Resources to support necessary ongoing board practices that impact succession planning (i.e., CEO evaluations; leadership development; and diversity, equity, and inclusion)

*"Hiring the CEO and ensuring they hit their big goals is the most important role of a charter board. Charter board members must step up to lead in careful planning and continued engagement with their CEO around succession planning if they want to be successful in the long-term."*

*Patrick Dobard, CEO of New Schools for New Orleans*

# Citations and Recommended Reading

## CEO SUCCESSION PLANNING

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## RELATED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

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