

# Rhode Island Charter Public Schools: **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**

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Office of College and Career Readiness  
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# Rhode Island Charter Public Schools

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):

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### **1. What is a charter school?**

Rhode Island's charter schools are public schools governed by independent boards and free from many of the policies and requirements of traditional public schools. They are secular and tuition-free. Enrollment is nonselective and conducted by random lottery.

Charter schools have flexibility and autonomy in areas including curriculum, staffing, organization, and budget. In exchange, each charter school must demonstrate that it is an academic success and a well-managed, sustainable organization.

### **2. Must charter schools comply with federal laws and regulations?**

Charter schools are subject to the same federal statutory and regulatory requirements applicable to traditional Rhode Island public schools, including laws governing special education and accessibility to students learning English.

### **3. What laws govern the creation of charter schools in Rhode Island?**

Enabling legislation allowing for the creation of public charter schools in Rhode Island was initially approved by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1995, amended in 1998, again in 2009, in 2010, and again in 2016.

The "Charter Public School Act of Rhode Island" (RIGLS 16-77 through 16-77.4) can be found at the following links: Chapter [16-77](#); Chapter [16-77.1](#); Chapter [16-77.2](#); Chapter [16-77.3](#); Chapter [16-77.4](#). The Regulations Governing Rhode Island Public Charter Schools can be found [here](#). Rhode Island has three types of charter schools: district charter schools, independent charter schools, and mayoral academies. Each charter school type is distinguished by its establishing entity and its level of autonomy, particularly around staffing and compensation.

*District charter schools* are established by existing public schools, groups of public school personnel, public school districts or groups of school districts and may be a new school or the conversion of an existing school. The establishment of district charter schools requires coordination with district officials and teachers, as well as agreement from any collective bargaining unit(s) if the charter school intends to have any provisions of existing agreements not apply.

*Independent charter schools* are established by colleges or universities within the State of Rhode Island, or by Rhode Island nonprofit organizations that have existed for at least two (2) years and exist for a substantial reason other than to operate a school. Independent charter schools that are seeking approval as a network charter, must have written support from each town or city council of each proposed enrolling district.

*Mayoral Academies* are created by a mayor or elected town administrator of any city or town within the State of Rhode Island, acting by or through a nonprofit organization established for said purpose. Mayoral academies enroll students from both urban and non-urban communities, and a mayor must serve as the school's Board chair. Unlike the other two types of charter schools, mayoral academies may elect out of statutory requirements to pay prevailing wages and benefits, participate in the state teachers' retirement system, and provide teachers tenure. Proposed mayoral academies must have approval from each city or town regarding participation in the academy's enrolling communities (catchment area). Approval must be from each mayor or in the absence of a mayor, the city or town council via a resolution or ordinance.

#### **4. What is a network Charter?**

A proposed charter will be considered a network charter school if the proposed charter school intends to include both elementary and secondary schools or multiple elementary and/or multiple secondary schools. Multiple elementary or secondary schools means the schools operate independently from one another with individual school budgets and school administrators (such as a school principal). The schools could be co-located; however, the schools run a separate lottery and enrollment process and would receive distinct school codes for statewide data reporting.

#### **5. Who approves and oversees charter schools in Rhode Island?**

The Rhode Island Council on Elementary and Secondary Education is the only body in Rhode Island with the authority to grant charters, which can be granted after a recommendation of the Commissioner. Charters are awarded for a period of up to five years, and are subject to renewal or revocation at the discretion of the Board.

The Rhode Island Department of Education's charter school staff facilitates the reviews of new charter school proposals and evaluates existing charter schools. The staff assists the Commissioner and the Board in making decisions relative to charter schools as well as setting charter school policy.

#### **6. What is the Rhode Island Department of Education's vision for charter schools?**

In keeping with the priorities articulated in the [Basic Education Program Regulations](#), charter schools are established to ensure that all students achieve at academic levels necessary for post-secondary readiness. With greater autonomy, charter schools are expected to serve as high-performing alternatives to Rhode Island's traditional public schools as demonstrated through measurable student achievement outcomes. Accordingly, charters will provide school choices and opportunities for Rhode Island families—particularly increasing the number of high quality education options for educationally disadvantaged students

Charter schools are intended to be places where creative approaches merge with research and best practice in academically rigorous learning environments. Expectations will be high for all members of each school community, and a commitment to continuous improvement will drive all processes. Charters will inspire students, maintain high levels of engagement, close achievement gaps, and

serve as models of distinguished instructional practice to the end that all Rhode Island students are prepared for the college and career of their choice.

## **7. What is a charter?**

Once a school has received final approval by the Council to operate as a charter school in Rhode Island, the school's board of directors becomes formally accountable to the terms of a charter. In general, the school's board is responsible for the academic and organizational (including financial) health of the school, and ensuring that the school complies with all applicable laws and regulations.

In Rhode Island, a final charter confers the authority to operate a public school. The final charter is developed after preliminary approval of an applicant group's proposal has been received from the Council. Final approval will not be granted by the Board until the final charter has been developed.

The charter includes key elements of the educational plan, program details (such as enrollment expectations), assurances required by statute, and the performance targets a school must meet during the five-year charter term. A school's accountability plan, which is a part of the charter, includes standard targets of academic performance and organizational viability and may also include school-specific targets. Schools will be evaluated against these targets, and results will make up the evidence for renewal decisions.

## **8. How are charter schools evaluated?**

The autonomy provided to charter schools comes with increased accountability for results. Toward the end of a charter term (typically the fourth year of a five-year term), schools are subject to renewal visits and evaluations, the results of which lead to a recommendation of renewal or non-renewal.

At all times, student learning and instructional excellence will serve as the primary evidence for charter school decision making and accountability. Throughout a school's charter term, RIDE collects evidence in the following performance areas:

- Student Academic Performance
- Financial Viability and Sustainability
- Organizational Quality
- Legal and Regulatory Compliance

This rigorous evaluation process includes an analysis of student outcome data, a site visit process, and a review of key organizational outcomes.

## **9. What can lead to charter revocation?**

According to the statutory role of the Commissioner in charter school oversight, the Council may revoke the charter of a charter school at any time if the school:

- (1) Materially violates any provision contained in the charter;
- (2) Fails to meet or pursue the educational objectives contained in the charter;
- (3) Fails to comply with fiscal accountability procedures as specified in the charter;
- (4) Violates provisions of law that have not been granted variance by the Council; or
- (5) After three (3) consecutive years of operation, is not a “high-performing charter school,” defined as a charter public school that has demonstrated overall success.

## 10. How are charter schools funded?

Charter schools, like all other public schools in Rhode Island, receive state and local (municipal) funding through [formulas](#) described in law. Charter schools are also eligible to receive federal funds, including Title program funds, IDEA, and Medicaid.

In addition to public formula-driven funds, charter schools may elect to seek additional funding through grants, awards, loans, or donations. It is typical for Rhode Island districts and charter schools to seek some level of additional funding to support academic programs and operational improvements. In particular, charter schools have sought to raise additional funds to pay for school facilities. Unlike district public schools, which typically operate in buildings owned by municipalities, charter schools must pay to lease or purchase space. Without additional funding, these costs are paid by public operating funds, which could result in a decrease in spending on academic and other programming. In cases of major capital improvements, some funds may be available for charter schools through Rhode Island’s [Necessity of School Construction](#) process.

Funding information for all school districts, including charter schools, is collected by the state’s [Uniform Chart of Accounts \(UCOA\)](#) and reported annually.

## 11. What types of students attend charter schools in Rhode Island?

Charter schools serve over 7,000 students in Rhode Island, or about 5% of the public school population. Rhode Island law requires that charter schools be open to any student regardless of background, characteristics, ability, or prior performance. One of the purposes of Rhode Island’s charter school law is to encourage the development of schools that serve the different learning styles and needs of public school students and to offer public school students innovative choices. Accordingly, charter schools may be established with a special emphasis on a particular subject matter or to serve specific targeted student populations.

Even if a charter school has a special focus, each charter school is responsible for reaching out to all parts of its enrolling community. In the event that more students apply to attend a charter school than the school can accommodate, students will be selected randomly by lottery (except for preferences for siblings of enrolled students, school staff, and founding members).

## 12. What is the process for reviewing a proposed charter? How long will it take?

The first step in the charter proposal review cycle is the submission of a Statement of Intent. This is a basic overview of the charter school's mission and plan.

Charter proposals are reviewed by an advisory committee of educational professionals, and are posted for public comment. At least two public hearings are held in the communities where the school proposes to open. After public comment and the committee review, a rigorous interview is conducted with the applicants. Once the proposal review is complete and all evidence gathered, the Commissioner selects which proposals to recommend to the Council for preliminary approval. An overview and general timeline of this process can be found on page 15.

## 13. Who is eligible to establish a charter school in Rhode Island?

In Rhode Island, the persons or entities eligible to establish charter schools are defined in state law ([RIGL 16-77 2.1](#)):

- Persons or entities eligible to establish district charter schools are limited to:
  - existing public schools
  - groups of public school personnel
  - public school districts, or
  - a group of school districts.
- Persons or entities eligible to establish independent charter schools are limited to:
  - Rhode Island nonprofit organizations provided that the nonprofit organizations shall have existed for at least two (2) years for reasons other than to operate a school
  - Colleges or universities within Rhode Island
- Persons or entities eligible to establish mayoral academies are limited to:
  - Rhode Island mayors or town administrators, acting by or through a nonprofit organization established for said purpose.

Statements of Intent, full charter proposals, and all related materials at the point of establishing a school must be submitted to RIDE by an eligible person or a representative of an eligible entity.

## 14. At what point in time is a charter school established?

After eligible charter applications are evaluated, the Commissioner decides which applications to recommend to the Council for preliminary approval. In cases where the Council awards preliminary approval, a new nonprofit entity must be incorporated with the Rhode Island Office of the Secretary of State. The new nonprofit entity, through an independent and properly formed board of directors, shall: 1) have the intention and sole purpose of operating a public charter school; and 2) abide by all

laws and regulations relating to public boards, including Open Meetings Law and Rhode Island Code of Ethics Regulations.

The governing board of the new nonprofit entity must be formed in accordance with the RIDE-approved by laws submitted with the Charter Proposal. Fiscal policies must be approved and in place prior to receiving charter school planning grants; the governing board will be responsible for the oversight of these funds if they are awarded.

Authorization to operate as a public charter school requires final approval by the Council. The Commissioner may recommend final approval after all readiness criteria are met, as outlined in C-1-4 of the [Rhode Island Charter School Regulations](#). After the development of a final Charter and an affirmative vote of final approval by the Council, a Charter is granted to the nonprofit entity established to operate the charter school.

**15. To what extent must the persons or entities that established the charter school remain affiliated with the new charter school?**

Once a charter school is established, the establishing person(s) or entity and the governing board of the charter school may decide how they wish to structure any ongoing affiliation or relationship. Staff or board members of the establishing entity may opt to serve on the governing board of the charter school, but must be mindful of any conflicts of interest that may arise, especially in cases where the establishing entity and the charter school begin a contractual relationship to render services to the charter school.

Responsibility or Contribution	Establishing Persons/ Entities	Nonprofit Entity Designing and Operating the Charter School	
		<i>After Preliminary Approval</i>	<i>After Final Approval</i>
Apply to establish a charter school	X		
Provide expertise and support as part of applicant group	X		
Recipients of a charter and accountable to its terms			X
Manage finances designed for school planning and operations		X	X
Request amendments to final Charter			X
Seek charter renewal			X

## 16. Can charter schools access startup funding?

Preliminarily approved charter proposals may apply to RIDE for charter school program (CSP) startup funding, if available, which is a program of the US Department of Education. The first portion of this funding is dedicated to *planning*, which is accessible prior to final approval by the Council. The second portion of startup funding is for *implementation*, which is accessible after final approval.

High performing charter schools may also apply for CSP *dissemination* grants to partner with other public schools to share best practices. All CSP funding is contingent on the quality of submissions and availability of funds.

## 17. Where can I find the most up-to-date materials and contact information for Rhode Island charter school-related issues?

The Rhode Island charter school statute can be found here:

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/Statutes/TITLE16/16-77/INDEX.HTM>

The “charter schools” portion of the RIDE website, including contact information, can be found here:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/studentsfamilies/ripublicschools/charterschools.aspx>

The Basic Education Program regulations (BEP) can be found here:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/InformationAccountability/Accountability/BasicEducationProgram.aspx>

The Regulations Governing Rhode Island Public Charter Schools can be found here:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/Students-and-Families-Great-Schools/Charter-Schools/Charter-Regulations-for-Promulgation-2011%5B1%5D.pdf>

For information on special education laws and regulations see:

<http://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/SpecialEducation/SpecialEducationProgramming.aspx>

For information on the laws, regulations, and best practices relating to English language learners, see: <http://www.ride.ri.gov/StudentsFamilies/EnglishLanguageLearners.aspx>

## 18. How can parents and guardians learn more or apply for enrollment?

Enrollment in a charter school is nonselective and conducted by random lottery. Each school must use a standard template for the enrollment applicant. While most of the application must remain standardized, schools may reformat the application in designated areas to include the school’s logo, school address, submission deadline, and submission instructions. Parents and guardians must complete an application with each school they may wish to enroll their student. Individual school’s will have specific information about application deadlines and methods of applying. A list of charter schools can be found [here](#).