

District Charter Schools FAQ



Providence Public School District (PPSD) has the unique opportunity to apply to convert one or more schools into district charter schools. This document addresses questions pertaining to the conversion process and policies surrounding charter schools.¹ PPCSD may amend this FAQ periodically as additional questions arise and clarification or updates are required. The Providence Teachers Union (PTU) and PPCSD will support a limited number of schools interested in pursuing this model. Please direct any additional questions or comments to Colleen Jermain, PPCSD Chief of Staff, at colleen.jermain@ppsd.org.

1: What is a district charter school?

Charter schools are public schools authorized by the State of Rhode Island to operate independently from many state and district rules and regulations. As a result of this flexibility, charter schools are able to pursue innovative educational strategies designed to meet specific student achievement goals and objectives as stated in their charters. In contrast to independent and Mayoral Academy charter schools, district charter schools are created by existing public schools, public school personnel, public school districts, or groups of school districts.

2: What is PPCSD's goal by converting to district charter schools?

The district's charter school strategy is designed to increase school-level autonomy in exchange for heightened accountability, provide parents with greater choice and alternatives to traditional public schools, and promote innovative and creative strategies to improve student achievement. The Providence Public School District is giving schools the opportunity to apply for district charter status for a number of reasons. With the identification of a third cohort of schools as needing improvement by the Rhode Island Department of Education, the district is acting creatively and boldly to support school improvement efforts district-wide. The charter strategy presents several exciting opportunities for our schools. First, we become eligible for charter school funding. Second, we will engage partners in the transformation of our schools by bringing additional capacity into the buildings. Third, it requires that the district engage in a careful needs assessment and planning process; the application itself will require schools to identify comprehensive, innovative and research-based reform strategies.

3: What are the benefits of becoming a district charter school?

As we look ahead to the 2013-15 school years, the PTU and PPCSD are interested in converting one or more existing public schools into district charter schools. This strategy presents many benefits and opportunities for our schools. The primary benefits come in the form of additional capacity, additional resources, and increased flexibility. The PTU and PPCSD will work with school planning teams to identify a collaborating partner for each school interested in converting to a district charter school; these partners (e.g., existing local charter school operators, non-profit organizations, institutions of higher education) will bring expertise and a proven track record working with similar student populations. Charter school applicants also become eligible for sizable Federal Charter School Program Grants awarded by RIDE. The charter school conversion is a great opportunity for schools looking to improve school culture and climate and student achievement by redesigning current academic and nonacademic programming. School planning teams will receive increased flexibility and autonomy to pursue innovative and research-based improvement strategies.

4: What does the process of converting to a district charter entail?

Schools hoping to convert to district charter schools for the 2013-2014 school year had to submit prospectuses² to RIDE by October 1, 2012. Martin Luther King and Spaziano Elementary School met this deadline and were approved by RIDE to submit a full application by December 1, 2012.

For those schools interested in converting to a district charter school for the 2014-15 school year, we are also operating under a short timeline to receive state approval and funding for the conversion. Schools must indicate their interest and intent to apply by **Friday, October 19, 2012**. The PTU and PPCSD will then work with school planning teams to submit a

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prospectus application to RIDE by **December 1, 2012**. RIDE will review the prospectus, and teams may be invited to submit a full application. RIDE will then review the completed applications and provide a period of public comment. The PTU and PPSD cannot and will not impose this strategy on any school, though we believe it presents many benefits and opportunities for growth and improvement. Two-thirds of teachers currently assigned to the school must approve the proposed charter, and the majority of parents and/or legal guardians of students currently assigned to the school must approve the charter.

5: Will district charter schools remain a part of the district?

Yes. District charter schools will continue to operate and function as part of the district. These schools will receive additional flexibility to implement new and creative programming; however, they will participate in district activities and maintain a certain degree of alignment with district programming and policies. District charter schools are likely to continue using district central services, particularly during the start-up phase (e.g., transportation, food services).

6: Will teachers retain their union membership?

Yes. Teachers serving in district charter schools will maintain their PTU membership. District charter school teachers will be employed by PPSD. All district charter school employees will be public school employees, having the same rights (incl. retirement) under RI and federal law as employees of non-chartered public schools.

7: What is the role of the collaborating partner and what is their relationship to the existing school team?

As noted, the PTU and PPSD will encourage all prospective district charter schools to partner with a collaborating external partner (e.g., existing local charter school operators, non-profit organizations, institutions of higher education). Collaborating partners will bring expertise and a proven track record of success. Partner organizations will be expected to work collaboratively with school leadership teams and school staff and will not take over management of the school. Our goal is to foster collaborative partnerships with external organizations, thereby promoting a rich learning environment and allowing for ongoing improvement. The PTU and PPSD will support a process to recruit and identify potential partners, and school teams will play an integral role in selecting their partner organization(s).

8: How would the charter conversation change a school's current schedule and/or programming?

As a part of the charter conversion process, school teams will be asked to develop and submit robust charter applications and school plans. The charter prospectus requires planning teams to identify the school's mission statement, needs, educational program, management structure, calendar, services for special populations, and enrollment strategy. School planning teams will work collaboratively to identify research-based strategies in each of these areas with the ultimate goal of improving student achievement; this may mean changing the school's current schedule and/or programming. Charter schools must provide a minimum of 180 instructional days per year.

9: Will district charter schools receive additional flexibility and autonomy?

District charter schools will receive autonomy over the design and implementation of comprehensive academic and nonacademic strategies. During the planning process, teams will be encouraged to reflect upon State statutes, State regulations, and district policies and rules that may impede the successful implementation of the school's charter. Schools will be encouraged to seek waivers to such policies in order to implement sound, research-based strategies. For example, the PTU and PPSD may agree to waive certain provisions of the collective bargaining agreement.

10: What is the accountability structure for district charter schools?

In exchange for heightened autonomy, charter schools will be accountable for progress and results. Charter schools must prepare yearly reports detailing progress made during the previous year. In the application itself, planning teams must articulate goals pertaining to educational performance and academic achievement, in addition to organizational

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viability (e.g., finances). The charter prospectus and application must include indicators of success and SMART goals in these areas. Approved charter schools will operate under a five-year charter granted by the RI Board of Regents.

11: Can district charter schools select their students and/or remove students from the building?

Students may not be removed from the buildings that now attend these schools. Siblings will get first priority going forward and the district is reviewing how and when the lottery system will take place going forward. PPSD is in ongoing conversations with RIDE regarding how the lottery system will be structured for District Charter Conversions. Charter schools must be prepared to serve students with diverse learning needs, including students with disabilities and English language learners. All students must receive full and meaningful access to the general education curriculum. PPSD will not and cannot selectively displace students as a result of the charter conversion process.

12: How will the district provide information to families and community members? At what point will community members be involved in the process?

We are currently determining which schools will pursue this option and with which partners. It is important for parents to know that we cannot convert a school into a district charter school without a majority parent/family vote in support of the conversion. We want parents and families to be included in this process, and we want families to be excited about the opportunities that it presents for our students. If the prospectus is approved and schools are invited to submit an application, we will engage parents and community members in a series of planning meetings. We want community members to have a voice in the planning process.

13: Which schools have indicated interest in applying for district charter school status?

The following elementary schools are/were considering converting to in-district charter schools: Harry Kizirian, Frank D. Spaziano, George J. West, Martin Luther King, Robert L. Bailey, Charles N. Fortes and Mary E. Fogarty. Nathan Bishop Middle School and E-Cubed Academy (High School) have also indicated interest. On October 1, 2012, MLK and Spaziano submitted prospectuses and both received preliminary approval.

14: What does the governance structure of a district charter school look like?

Through the planning process, teams must determine a governance structure for the school. All charters are led by a governing board. The planning team must determine how board members will be selected and define the role of the board vis-à-vis building leadership. At minimum, the board is responsible for monitoring the performance of the school.

¹Much of the information presented in this FAQ is taken from RIDE's charter school website and RI State Charter School Regulations. For more information, please visit RIDE's website: <http://www.ride.ri.gov/Commissioner/charterschools/default.aspx>.