



Charter School Pre-Opening Protocol

Updated: May 2024

Overview

The Tennessee Public Charter School Commission (“Commission”) holds all charter schools under its authorization accountable for providing students with a high-quality, public education. With regard to its role as an appellate authorizer of charter schools, the Commission provides positive academic and life outcomes for Tennessee’s students through access to high-quality public charter schools.¹ Therefore, the Commission outlines a pre-opening process under [Commission Policy 3.100 – Charter Agreements](#) (aligned to the Commission’s [Core Authorizing Principles](#)) to ensure all schools are compliant and ready to open their doors to serve students.

For all schools opening under the Commission, the Commission has a robust, detailed pre-opening process spanning the eight months prior to a new school opening under the authorization of the Commission. This pre-opening process begins in November and concludes in July. The Commission attempts to streamline the pre-opening process, making it organized and actionable and minimizing administrative burden. The Commission has also created a series of monthly best practice trainings aligned to the pre-opening checklist for schools and operators.

Pre-Opening Requirements

Pre-opening requirements are a set of actions that a school must complete prior to opening its doors and welcoming students. Schools must demonstrate that they have met all requirements and are ready to begin instruction. Pre-opening requirements include documentation of completion of items including, but not limited to, enrollment, data management, staff hiring and licensure, grants, funding, policies, and physical facilities. The Commission provides a detailed list of all pre-opening items within the pre-opening checklist, which is an exhibit to the charter agreement.

Updating Start-Up Plans

Following authorization by the Commission, schools are expected to submit an updated plan/timeline for key “Ready to Open” pre-opening items (facilities, financing, community engagement, etc.). Considering the amount of time and work between when the initial application was submitted and the Commission’s decision on the appeal, updates are necessary, and the pre-opening process and submissions will be built upon these updated plans. The Commission will meet with schools to overview the Pre-Opening process in November, and schools should submit their updated plans by the December meeting. Schools should update the startup plan included in the approved charter application for submission.

Note: the basis of the start-up plan, facilities, staffing, enrollment, etc. shall be based on what was approved within the charter application and the charter agreement. Commission staff will review any modifications to these plans to determine if they require a material modification to the charter agreement. These changes include, but are not limited to: location of the facility, projected enrollment, and projected grades served in Year 1.

¹ TPCSC Mission Statement [1.000 – Tennessee Public Charter School Mission Statement](#)

Pre-Opening Checklist

The pre-opening checklist is broken into three sections.

1. Ready to Open Criteria. The “Ready to Open” criteria outline foundational items necessary for a school to be ready to open and specifically covers enrollment, facilities, staffing, and the financial plan. These deliverables generally align with the material terms stated in the charter application, and the operator should aim to complete all items in accordance with the timelines specified within the criteria. If a school does not meet the dates listed within the timeline, it does not necessarily mean a delay is required; however, schools should strongly consider exercising their right to delay if they are not meeting the following dates or not on track to meet them within the general timeframe.
2. Required Compliance Items. The second part of the checklist is primarily compliance-based with applicable laws and regulations to ensure effective management of school operations.
3. Facility Walk-Through. Finally, there are checklists for the school facility walkthrough as well as additional upcoming reporting calendar items included. Schools will have other tasks to complete outside of this checklist, such as those specific to individual grant applications.

It is the Commission’s obligation to determine if schools meet all necessary requirements to open. Pursuant to [Commission Policy 3.100](#), all requirements for pre-opening must be completed in accordance with the charter agreement. A school or operator’s failure to complete pre-opening items or effectively communicate regarding progress could result in a delay in opening. It is the school and/or operator’s responsibility to fulfill the requirements for pre-opening. The Commission reserves the right to require the school delay its opening by one academic year should the school be materially off-track for a successful opening.

Timeline and Completion of Pre-Opening Checklist

A comprehensive pre-opening checklist is provided to each school and/or operator with a detailed list of pre-opening actions, documentation, and deadlines. This pre-opening checklist serves as a working document between the Commission and the school to track progress and ensure all items are accomplished. This checklist is sent to schools by November prior to the first meeting to allow time to review.

Schools and operators will utilize this checklist to delegate tasks amongst their teams, track progress on pre-opening, and organize deadlines. This checklist is subject to change as regulations and policies may change.

Schools and operators are expected to submit all requirements within the checklist through the designated shared folder in a timely manner and effectively communicate any questions or delays. All deadlines are laid out within the checklist provided. The Commission will check in via email or phone frequently with schools and operators to ensure all questions are answered and progress is going smoothly. In addition to informal check-ins, the Commission will hold monthly best practice meetings (described in detail below). In July, the Commission will conduct an in-person walkthrough and transition meeting at the school with the school team.

Preparing for the Pre-Opening Process

- Identify a point of contact and pre-opening team – communication between the Commission and operators during the pre-opening process is frequent and sometimes will fall outside of the formal check-ins and monthly meetings. Designating a pre-opening point of contact and providing a list of roles and responsibilities for your pre-opening team is important to ensure effective and efficient communication.
- Submit updated pre-opening plan/timeline – by December's pre-opening meeting, provide the Commission with updates regarding facilities, financing, community engagement, etc. for any items that may be out of date since the submission of the initial application to the local district. Schools should update the startup plan included in the charter application for submission.
- Monthly Best Practice Meetings – the Commission will schedule monthly meetings to check in on progress and offer professional development on specific requirements and topics, particularly regarding any targeted areas of support for the operator. These meetings will be thirty minutes to one hour in length and will be scheduled within the seven/eight-month timeline. Attendance at these meetings with the pre-opening point of contact and any applicable staff is critical, as it serves as an opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the pre-opening process and deliverables required by the school.
- File Sharing and Documentation – the Commission will set up a file sharing system through Microsoft Teams where all necessary pre-opening documentation will be uploaded. Documentation due dates and file naming conventions will be provided within the pre-opening checklist. It is the school's responsibility to ensure all documents are properly uploaded within the file sharing system.

Process of Internal Review of Submissions

- Commission staff completes an internal review of submitted materials after each submission date.
- If immediate follow-up or action is needed, or if there are missing items, the school will receive an email outlining action steps.
- If no immediate action is needed, schools can expect a check-in confirming all requirements have been met during the subsequent monthly pre-opening meeting.
- Commission staff will ask for updates regarding all "Ready to Open" items at each check-in. While there are specific timelines for items within the checklist, the Commission staff may ask for additional documentation or updates as operators work through these foundational items. It is the school operator's responsibility to respond to Commission staff's requests for this information.

Monthly Best-Practice Meetings

1. November – Pre-Opening Kickoff Meeting – Overview of Checklist and Submission of Updated Plan for Ready to Open Criteria
2. December – Authorizing and Ongoing Monitoring, What to Expect and Review of Submitted Pre-Opening Plan
3. January – School Performance Framework and Accountability
4. February – Enrollment and Data Management
5. March – Grants and Funding
6. April – Teacher Licensure, Staffing, and Special Populations
7. May – Preparing for Policy Audit and Monitoring and Implementation of Special Populations
8. June – Revisiting Data, Management, and the SIS
9. July – Transition from Pre-Opening to Reporting Calendar and Facilities Walk Through

Note – These monthly meetings serve as checkpoints of progress and training throughout the pre-opening process. There will be items and communication that fall outside of this meeting schedule, so these meetings will not be the sole communication operators have with the Commission. The Commission will communicate via email with points of contact and schedule additional meetings as necessary outside of these monthly meetings.

All meetings are held virtually via Teams unless otherwise specified within the schedule.