

## WHAT IS YOUR CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD'S PURPOSE?

Brian L. Carpenter  
CEO  
National Charter Schools Institute

One of the reasons many charter school boards spend their time on administrivia—that infinite combination of trivial, yet tantalizing administrative details—is that they don't really understand why their board exists. While board members have often been adjured to “govern, not manage,” they're often hard-pressed to tell the difference between the two because they cannot state the purpose of the board's existence. So, toward improving charter school governance, let's start there.

John Carver, an internationally respected expert on board governance, says that the purpose of a board is to represent the owners of an organization. The board does this by ensuring that the organization accomplishes the owners' purposes while not transgressing the owners' values (Carver, 2006, *inter alia*).

This principle is easy to see in the equity world. The shareholders put a board in place to ensure that the company produces value while not harming the environment, breaking the law, etc.

But let's apply Carver's definition to charter schools. Who owns them? There are no equity holders in charter schools because they are not-for-profit corporations. Nor are charter schools owned by for-profit (or not-for-profit) management companies, despite the valuable expertise many of them provide. And they're not exclusively owned by—this one may surprise you—the school's stakeholders, you know, parents, teachers, principals, students, and the local community (Carver, 2002). And even though many charter school founders have done tremendously visionary things for kids, founders do not own charter schools.

Who then? This is really quite simple when you think about it. Because charter schools, or as I prefer to call them for clarity, *chartered schools*, are created by statute, they are owned by *the public*. Sure, stakeholders (including management and founders) are part of that group. But don't be confused on this point. The owners of a charter school are far more numerous than the stakeholders. This distinction becomes critical every time the board has to consider a decision in which the stakeholders (or some subset thereof) want one thing, and the owners want another. This may create tension at times, *but the role of the board is to govern on behalf of the owners*.

So, how to do this. I recommend that boards start by regularly allocating time on *their agenda* toward the development of their own governance capacity (Carpenter, 2006). In the early stages of its development, the board should hold candid discussions among its members about what it means to represent the owners of a charter school—the outcomes of which should affect every subsequent board and management decision. Questions such as, “What do the owners of this charter school expect?” and “How will we know if we're delivering it?” are good starters. (Incidentally, the public wants more from charter schools than Adequate Yearly Progress as defined by No Child Left Behind.)

Further, once the board understands its ownership responsibility, it will be equipped with the means to evaluate *all* its agenda items. When certain things—I don't know . . . classroom paint colors, cheerleader skirt lengths, or maintenance contracts to name a few of the board discussions I've observed—don't rise to the level of ownership, the board should say, “We're not interested!” Then, with no time lost, doughtily turn its attention to student growth and achievement. Now, there's a topic worthy of any charter school board's time.



Brian L. Carpenter is CEO of the National Charter Schools Institute and author of *Charter School Board University: An Introductory Course to Effective Charter School Governance*. You can reach him at (989) 205-4182 or by email at [bcarpenter@nationalcharterschools.org](mailto:bcarpenter@nationalcharterschools.org). As long as proper attribution is cited, we welcome you to print and distribute as many copies of these as you like.