



POSITION DESCRIPTION

POSITION:	Executive Director
REPORTS TO:	State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees
ORGANIZATION:	SUNY Charter Schools Institute (www.newyorkcharters.org)
LOCATION:	Albany, New York and New York City

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

The Charter Schools Institute (the Institute) was created in 1999 by the Board of Trustees of the State University of New York (SUNY) to assist it in carrying out its responsibilities under the New York Charter Schools Act of 1998 (the Act). The Act designated the State University Trustees as one of three “chartering entities” or authorizers with the authority to receive applications for the creation of 100 public schools that would operate independently of local schools districts – schools dedicated to improving student learning and achievement and to increasing learning opportunities for all students, particularly those at risk of academic failure.

Over the last eight years, the Institute and SUNY have achieved national recognition as a high quality charter authorizer, recognized not only for the clarity of their policies and practices, but for having some of the most rigorous standards for charter granting and renewal in the country. Today, SUNY is the nation’s second largest University-affiliated authorizer of charter schools. Within the world of charter school authorizers, SUNY is considered to be a highly active, innovative thought leader for effective authorization, transparency, and accountability. The Charter Schools Institute has viewed its role as safeguarding the public interest in the health, safety and welfare of children while enabling charter school educators to do the primary work of teaching students and providing a high quality educational alternative to traditional school districts. Striking that delicate and difficult balance between giving schools autonomy and providing responsible oversight is the hard work that the State University Trustees has committed to, and a principle that drives the work of the Charter Schools Institute.

The Act divided the responsibility for receiving and reviewing applications for the 100 designated charters among the three chartering entities. The State University Trustees were assigned 50 charters, and the remaining 50 charters were assigned to the New York State Board of Regents and local boards of education (in New York City, this authority is given to the Chancellor of the New York City school system). The Act allowed an unlimited number of existing traditional district-operated schools to seek to convert to charter status through their governing boards of education. The New York State Board of Regents sets overall educational policy for the State of New York and maintains oversight for all schools in the state, including charter schools.

As of the 2006-07 school year there were 93 operating charter schools in New York State serving 26,614 students. SUNY authorized 40 of these schools, serving nearly 12,000 students. Three additional SUNY authorized charter schools will open in the 2007-08 school year bringing the total number of New York State charter schools to 96. SUNY authorized charter schools report a projected enrollment for 2007-08 of 13,215 students with 13,815 additional students reported on waiting lists for admissions.

In April 2007, the New York State Legislature, with the support of Governor Eliot Spitzer, voted effectively to amend the New York Charter Schools Act, adding an additional one hundred charters in the State, of which fifty are to be awarded by the State University Trustees. Additional changes to the Act include a number of new public hearing requirements.

The Charter Authorizing Process

Guided by the rigorous standards set by the SUNY Board of Trustees, the Institute's oversight of SUNY-authorized charter schools is comprehensive, including acceptance and evaluation of new school charter applications; ongoing oversight and evaluation of all charter schools authorized by SUNY; and regular reporting to the public on each school's performance and progress. The Institute's oversight responsibilities include implementing a schedule of school inspection visits by Institute staff (generally conducted towards the end of the first and second years of instruction during an initial charter cycle and regularly thereafter, supplemented by an external evaluation in the third year); providing technical assistance and guidance to schools where necessary; reviewing requests for changes in program; requiring schools to take remedial action or placing schools on probation; and very importantly, conducting a comprehensive evaluation when a school applies to renew its charter.

The Act mandates that the lifespan of a charter school is inextricably tied to achievement and accountability. An initial charter -- a contract between the charter school's board of trustees and the authorizer stipulating what the school agrees to do and defining how it will be accountable -- is awarded for a period of five years. Charter schools are given the freedom to develop their own curriculum, choose their own staff, set the length of school day and year, and establish their own standards for student behavior. In return, a charter

school must show that it has raised student achievement. Charter schools must comply with laws regarding health, safety, civil rights, special education, Freedom of Information, and Open Meetings; they must also comply with federal No Child Left Behind legislation and state performance requirements. Funding for charter schools comes through the school districts from a combination of state and local sources supplemented by federal aid.

All SUNY authorized schools are required to submit designated Accountability Plans that become part of the school's charter. These plans establish specific student achievement goals and the criteria for measuring whether the goals have been met. SUNY has set particularly strong standards for its authorized charter schools on the New York State annual assessments. A recent Institute analysis of the 2006-07 state exams revealed that 74.2 percent of SUNY-authorized charter schools outperformed their local districts on the State exam in mathematics and 70 percent outperformed their local districts on the State exam in English Language Arts.

The Charter Schools Act requires that charter schools submit an application for renewal upon completion of each charter term. The State University Trustees have clearly documented their rigorous expectations for charter renewal. Successful applicants for renewal must present a comprehensive, evidence-based, case of the school's growth and increased student achievement over the life of the charter; a description of the systems the school currently has in place to continue that growth; and a set of well-designed plans that will result in future growth. Since its creation, the Institute has made the recommendation for non-renewal five times and the SUNY Board of Trustees has supported these recommendations.

The Charter Schools Institute

The Institute is housed within SUNY's Research Foundation, a separate 501 (c)(3), as an independent institute reporting directly to the SUNY Board of Trustees through its Committee on Charter Schools, which meets six to eight times per year. For day-to-day administrative purposes, the Executive Director of the Institute reports to the President of the Research Foundation, John O'Connor, who also serves as Vice Chancellor of the SUNY system and Secretary to the Board of Trustees.

The Institute is funded through two separate appropriations in the New York State budget. The first is an appropriation of \$2.15 million that flows through the State Education Department to SUNY and then to the SUNY Research Foundation via a contract through the Office of the State Comptroller. In addition the Institute receives an appropriation of \$818,500 from SUNY's University-wide budget. Staff members are employed by either the Research Foundation and by SUNY. The Institute has two offices – its primary office in Albany and a smaller office in New York City.

Since its inception, the Institute has been led officially by three individuals: Scott Steffey, one of the founders, served as the Institute's first President. He was followed by Robert Bellafiore, currently a Trustee of SUNY. James Merriman IV, who has recently been appointed Chief Executive Officer of the New York Center for Charter School Excellence, served as Executive Director from 2002 to 2007.

The new Executive Director of the Institute will assume the role at a particularly auspicious time. Governor Spitzer has made an enormous investment in education, infusing new funds into the State Education Department and lifting the cap on charter schools. No longer an uncertain experiment, charter schools have proven that, subject to standards of scrupulous accountability, they offer a high quality choice to students and families. With the mandate to review and recommend for Trustee approval up to fifty new charters, the Institute is poised on a wave of opportunity and expectation. The new Executive Director will be able to build on the Institute's reputation for rigorous application review, continuous assessment, and innovative thinking while ensuring that the Institute is organized, managed, and funded in a manner that enables fulfillment of its mission.

THE POSITION

The Executive Director (ED) provides strategic and visionary leadership to The Institute. S/he is accountable to the SUNY Board of Trustees for all aspects of the Institute's programmatic and financial operations. S/he is responsible for overseeing the Institute's charter authorizing and renewal activities, monitoring the performance of charter schools and providing honest feedback, presenting recommendations to the SUNY Board of Trustees, and representing the Institute to the broader community. S/he must ensure that the organization and administration of the Institute support its mission, that Institute staff have the resources and support they need, and that the authorization process remains objective and free of political influences. The ED serves as the Institute's principal public persona, representing the organization to the charter school, educational, political, corporate, and philanthropic communities, participating in state-wide and national conferences, and creating and sustaining partnerships with other organizations that serve the educational and authorizing purposes for which the Institute was created. The ED leads the Institute in navigating through the political environment of New York State as well as the politics of the SUNY system and in developing and maintaining a constructive working relationship with the State Department of Education.

The ED manages a staff of eighteen highly capable professionals, the majority of whom are located in Albany. These include a Senior Vice President, Vice President and General Counsel, Director of Public Affairs, and Vice Presidents for Accountability, School Fiscal Accountability, Charter School Evaluation, and Applications.

The ED manages an overall budget of nearly \$3 million, which has historically been adequate to fund its activities. With the increased workload resulting from the fifty new charters, the ED will need to evaluate the organization's needs and workflow and put together a plan and realistic budget to obtain additional support. S/he will also need to evaluate the Institute's systems and develop a technology plan to enable more efficient workflow within the Institute.

In addition to the growth that will come from the increase in the number of charters, the ED will have the opportunity to develop the Institute into a fully realized academic institute of SUNY that can harness the significant information collected and lessons learned from the Institute's first eight years of operation. As the Institute collects data from the growing number of SUNY authorized charter schools across the State, each with different types of curricula and organizational structures, it has the opportunity to make keen observations about the likelihood of success and failure, to conduct research and to share best practices. Positioned within SUNY and able to draw upon its strengths, the ED will need to identify which components of the broader State University can help advance this intellectual conversation and bring this aspect of the Institute's mission to fruition.

To continue to build the Institute's strong reputation within the charter school authorizing community, the ED will need to be an energetic and articulate leader with a commitment to and vision for charter schools and the stature to command respect from educational leaders (including those currently not involved with or even skeptical about charter schools), the charter school community, the corporate community, the neighborhoods served by charter schools, and the political entities with which the Institute interacts. S/he must have the leadership skills to implement the vision, the financial acumen to understand the business model of running charters, and the management skills associated with a good chief executive, including the ability to hire, develop, and retain a talented staff. At the same time, the ED must be comfortable leading a small organization with a flat and somewhat fluid organizational structure that prides itself on being thorough in its processes as well as responsive to new ideas and opportunities.

The ED must have the intellectual strength and communications skills to present the Institute and its activities to a broad audience. S/he will need to have antennae sensitive enough to identify and anticipate issues that will be of concern to the Institute's constituents. Through effective communication, grantsmanship, and other fund-raising activities, the ED will need to ensure that the Institute receives the resources it needs in order to achieve its broadened mission. The ED must also have the interpersonal and relationship building skills to work effectively with and win the support of SUNY's Board as well as the charter school community. The successful candidate will understand what distinguishes a high quality school and be prepared to reach out to people in the field who can help provide assistance to schools in need. At the same time, she or he must be able to negotiate the fine balance between preserving a school's independence and helping it to be successful. The ED will be professional, not ideological, and able to

work effectively in a political world. Above all, the ED must believe in improving education and view charter schools as a critical vector in enhancing the lives of New York State children.

RESPONSIBILITIES

- Provide visionary and strategic leadership to the Institute, working with the SUNY Board of Trustees and SUNY leadership to implement the Institute's objectives and carry out a set of initiatives and activities that realize them.
- Represent the Institute to a broad range of constituencies, including the State University Trustees; charter school leaders and school board members; academic leaders within SUNY; members of the regional and national charter school community; parents and students; political leaders; the Board of Regents; the State Education Department; and the Institute's sponsors and supporters.
- Continue to build and maintain strong relationships with the Governor's office, the New York State Legislature, the Board of Regents, and SUNY.
- Continue to build and maintain research and working relationships with relevant professional associations and foundations as well as among research entities within SUNY that show an interest in charter school authorization and performance.
- Identify, create, and oversee new projects and initiatives that address issues affecting charter schools, including the dissemination of learning and best practices.
- Recruit, retain, manage, and develop a highly educated and independent staff that is motivated to do its best work. Develop a strong sense of teamwork and establish an environment of initiative, mentoring, and support.
- Represent the Institute both in person and in print, speaking out on critical issues affecting charter schools and disseminating ideas to a broad range of audiences interested in educational quality and reform.
- Provide astute financial management of a complex budget that includes multiple sources of support.
- Ensure that the Institute provides responsive, non-bureaucratic service in its authorization activities and interaction with its charter schools.

REQUIREMENTS

- A broad vision for charter school authorization and operation informed by the belief that charter schools should be excellent, accountable, and autonomous; an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of charter schools; and a passion for promoting access to high quality educational alternatives.
- An advanced degree preferred; a strong grasp of issues affecting K-12 education and an appreciation for the teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom; a public policy and issues orientation would be helpful.
- Demonstrated leadership skills that derive from the experience of having implemented a vision, engaged and won support from a variety of stakeholders and constituencies, interacted with and energized a board of trustees, and set strategic direction for an organization.
- A strong track record of successfully making the case for continuing and increased support, particularly within an environment of competing priorities.
- Demonstrated success in managing and motivating a staff and in recognizing and supporting talent.
- Excellent organizational and strategic skills combined with systems thinking and the insight and creativity to find new ways of doing things; a commitment to evidence-based data.
- Strong interpersonal, collaborative, relationship building, and negotiating skills.
- Must have a sophisticated understanding of politics while being neither political nor partisan; sensitivity to preserving the independence of the Institute; understanding of the objectivity required in the role of regulator; sensitivity to the impact of public relations within a political environment.
- Superb written and oral communication skills as well as excellent listening and synthesizing skills; the ability to make a persuasive and compelling argument. Ability to play a visible role in both regional and national venues.
- A high degree of energy combined with tact and diplomacy; sound judgment and the ability to distill important issues and principles; a strong work ethic; the ability to juggle multiple priorities; and a determination to get things done and to do them the right way.

- A presence and self-confidence that will win the support and trust of the State University of New York, the Institute's staff, and its many constituents.

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Nominations or a letter of application accompanied by a resume and the names of five references, should be submitted electronically in confidence to SUNYCHARTER@divsearch.com

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For further information about the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute, please consult its website as www.newyorkcharters.org.