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ASPIRE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

An Approach to Opening New Schools

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INFORMATION ABOUT THIS TOOL

Aspire Public Schools has developed a detailed, systematic approach to opening new schools, which they have found can reduce the complexity of the challenging process of new site development. This case will walk you through some of the systems and practices they have put in place.

This case study was prepared by FSG Social Impact Advisors. FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm that provides guidance to foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and other public sector entities on issues of strategy, evaluation, and operations. FSG was commissioned by NewSchools Venture Fund to document “promising practices” of portfolio ventures in a format that could be shared across the NewSchools portfolio. To complete this case study, FSG conducted background research on Aspire Public Schools and interviewed Gloria Lee, Aspire’s Chief Operating Officer. Joanne Weiss of NewSchools Venture Fund provided additional context on Aspire.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

We hope that reading this case study sparks conversations about how the practices highlighted here relate to your own organization. To help facilitate that process, we have developed the questions below to help guide these discussions. We encourage you to keep them in mind as you read through the case study and to refer back to them as your organization reflects on the case study’s implications for your own organization.

1. How does opening a new school impact your organization?
2. What systems could you develop to make opening new schools easier and/or more efficient?
3. Do you have rubrics that allow you to compare potential new school locations or geographies across a variety of dimensions?
4. Would a “location greenlighting” process like the one Aspire has developed help inform your decisions about whether to move forward with a school on a particular site or in a particular city/region?
5. Have you identified the organizational structure that best supports the process you use to identify and develop new school sites?

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Opening new schools is a complex and challenging endeavor for charter school management organizations (CMOs). The process requires an intense amount of work and the ability to manage a vast array of tasks over a relatively short period of time. Even experienced charter school operators are often daunted by the complexity of managing parallel processes to identify and develop a new site, secure a charter, recruit students, and hire staff. Having a systematic process and the appropriate internal capacity in place can significantly reduce the level of risk and uncertainty involved.

Aspire Public Schools (Aspire), a CMO based in Oakland, California, has developed a detailed approach to opening new schools based on nearly 10 years of experience starting and operating charter schools in multiple geographies throughout California. What follows is an overview of Aspire's school opening process – a summary that is intended to provide a framework for other school management organizations that are considering how to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their own new school openings.

Background on Aspire Public Schools

Aspire Public Schools (Aspire) establishes and operates public charter schools in California focused on providing low-income, urban youth with a high-quality education that will prepare them for college. Founded in 1998 to “*enrich students' lives and to reshape the public school system,*”¹ Aspire opened its first two charter schools in 1999 in California's Central Valley, and currently operates 17 schools in six counties throughout California serving more than 4,900 students in grades K – 12. Aspire opens an average of three schools each school year.

ASPIRE'S SCHOOL OPENING PROCESS

Aspire has developed a highly effective approach to opening new schools that is driven by the following core elements:

- A well-conceived **strategy** that provides focus and leverages existing relationships and resources;
- An **organizational structure** that is well-aligned with the organization's strategy and that maximizes efficiency;
- An in-depth “**greenlighting**” **process** that guides site selection and helps mitigate risks and challenges leading up to the opening of the new school's doors;
- A detailed and rigorous **workplan** with a clear timeline and delineation of responsibilities; and
- Well-developed **tools** that provide a clear roadmap for each stage of the school opening process.

¹ Aspire Web site, <http://www.aspirepublicschools.org/about/about.html>

ASPIRE'S SCHOOL OPENING STRATEGY

A core part of Aspire's mission is to be a catalyst for change in California by reshaping the state's public school system. The organization does this by concentrating its growth in geographic areas in which Aspire can have a significant impact on a school district by serving a large percentage (at least 10 percent) of the student population within that district. The resulting implication is that Aspire's team chooses to open a substantial number of schools in a relatively limited number of geographies. Not only does this strategy provide a clear focus for the organization, but it also makes the school opening process go more smoothly, because Aspire is able to build upon existing relationships. For example, pre-existing relationships with superintendents and school board members facilitate the process of obtaining new charters for additional schools in those areas. In addition, Aspire can often re-use the same memorandum of understanding (MOU) in a district where a cluster of its schools already exist, saving a substantial amount of time and effort.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Given Aspire's focus on opening schools within specific geographic regions – as well as the rapid pace at which its new schools are opened, an average of three schools per year – the organization recently shifted its organizational structure to a regional model. This model consists of a small home office that provides oversight and support to three regional offices in key geographies. Each regional office is headed by a regional vice president and includes a support staff that is responsible for the implementation of new school openings. Whereas home office staff used to be involved in all aspects of opening new schools, many of these details are now handled directly by the regional offices, freeing up the home office team to focus on delivering high-level support across all of Aspire's schools in areas like academic performance and fundraising.

Greenlighting a School Location

Aspire uses what it terms a "greenlighting" process to determine where to open schools and, once those locations are chosen, to ensure that the school opening process remains on track.

Location Greenlighting Criteria	
Criteria	Weight
Mission: Student need	2 pts
Mission: Likelihood of catalyzing change	1 pt
Availability of suitable facilities	2 pts
Ease of quality control	2 pts
Availability of philanthropic funding	2 pts
Favorable chartering environment	1 pt
TOTAL	10 pts

The Aspire team has developed highly focused rubrics that allow them to compare prospective school locations or geographies across a variety of dimensions. When evaluating new sites in an existing region, they use an individual site rubric. A potential new site is given zero, one, or two points for each of six criteria, for a maximum of 10 total points (see sidebar). A similar rubric is used to evaluate whether to pursue a new geographic region or continue to grow in an existing region (see Toolkit for *Rubric for New School Openings*). This rubric uses the same criteria as the individual site rubric, and is based on a scale of one (poor fit) to three (attractive). These two rubrics are then used to guide

analysis and inform discussion with Aspire’s board of directors about whether to move forward with a particular site or geography (see Toolkit for *Prospective New School Summary* and *Growth Options 2007*).

The rubrics are also used to help Aspire’s management team decide whether to delay a school opening or find a temporary location. The organization has set up a process in which key milestones must be hit by specific dates (see sidebar). If the milestone is not met, there is then a discussion of whether the project should continue, and if it should, how to adjust the workplan to resolve any critical issues. This may occur in particularly difficult situations where key construction milestones are not on track, or when the organization encounters roadblocks with the process of securing a charter. According to the Aspire team, these rubrics have been highly effective in helping them detect and resolve issues as early in the process as possible. Thanks in large part to this approach, Aspire has not yet had to halt a school opening project once it has begun.

Factors That Would Lead Aspire To Re-assess a New Site

Facilities

- Lease not signed by nine months prior to school opening
- Occupancy costs exceed 10 percent of average daily attendance
- Failure to meet key construction milestones
- Failure to receive zoning or permits needed

Financials

- Enrollment configuration is off-model
- Projected scale-up costs exceed projected start-up philanthropy
- Anticipated grants are not received

Charter Development

- Separate charter deemed not likely before opening of school
- Failure to meet any chartering milestones
- District changes to terms of charter contract

School Opening Process Workplan

Aspire’s school opening process is organized around five primary workstreams (for a more detailed overview, see Toolkit for *School Opening Process Chart*):

Workstream	Key Steps
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify and secure site ▪ Secure financing ▪ Build or renovate site ▪ Negotiate daily operations with landlord (if leasing)
Charter development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prepare and obtain charter ▪ Apply for charter # and County-District-School (CDS) #
Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop financial model ▪ Secure start-up funding ▪ Develop annual school budget
Staff and students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Hire principal ▪ Hire teachers ▪ Enroll students
Governance and operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Governance ▪ Procurement

Most of these workstreams happen concurrently, although certain elements – such as facilities and charter development – require particularly long lead times. Securing a facility can begin as early as three years before a school is opened if new construction is involved, while the process for obtaining a charter ideally begins nine

months before a new school is slated to open. These two tasks are handled by home office staff. Once a principal is hired for the new school site, which typically occurs about six months before the school opens, that individual becomes the project manager and takes on primary responsibility for tasks that require a bit less lead time, including student enrollment, staffing, operations, and governance, with support from the home office as needed.

Aspire uses two primary tools to guide and monitor the development of a new school site. The first of these is a school start-up workplan, which is used to outline all of the key tasks involved in opening a school and is designed for the period after a facility has been identified and a principal has been hired (see Toolkit for *Sample School Start-up Workplan*). This workplan helps the principal understand the scope of responsibilities related to school opening for which he or she is responsible, while also clearly laying out the responsibilities of central office staff. (Note that at the time of the writing of this case study, Aspire was still shifting its model to the aforementioned regional structure; as a result, several of the roles in the attached document, as well as in the *School Opening Process Chart*, will likely change. It is also important to note that facilities acquisition is not part of the attached workplan because it occurs well in advance of all other components of the workplan.) A second important tool is the school opening status sheet, which is used to update the board on the status of projects that are underway, and to help the management team check in with one another regarding progress on key elements of the school opening (see Toolkit for *New School Opening Status Report*).

SUCCESS FACTORS

There are several distinguishing factors that enable Aspire to be particularly effective in its approach to opening new schools. These include:

- ***In-depth analysis around fit and feasibility.*** Specific site selection criteria and the “greenlighting process” provide a framework for sound decision making.
- ***Functional specialization.*** Specific tasks are assigned to either the home office, regional office, or school site staff based on appropriate knowledge and expertise.
- ***Tools and systems.*** Rubrics, workplans, and templates have been developed to guide decision making and increase efficiency.

According to Gloria Lee, Aspire’s Regional Vice President for the Bay Area and former Chief Operating Officer, the systems and processes that are in place “help Aspire get to better answers quicker and with more certainty.”

Last year we opened up two new L.A. campuses and on the opening day of the bigger school, none of the senior management team from our home office was down there. It just happened. It was being handled by people who knew what they were doing.

- Gloria Lee, Regional Vice President, Bay Area, Aspire

ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNED

- ***Implementing a multi-site model requires a high degree of coordination.*** Opening multiple schools in a given year is challenging given the number of elements that need to be put in place and the number of people involved in the process.

- ***Opening new schools is not a cookie-cutter process.*** Unlike a multi-site retail model, opening schools involves individual decisions that may vary from site to site. As Lee puts it, “*The community reaction, the enrollment process, dealing with the district and its politics, and the timeline based on facility availability all require a great deal of adaptation and customization to make it work.*”
- ***Enrollment is much easier in districts where an organization already has existing schools.*** There is less need for active recruitment in these cases because families hear about the new school through word of mouth.
- ***Building trust and relationships in the community is very helpful with facilities acquisition.*** Relationship-building is a key factor in locating and acquiring facilities. Community contacts can provide references and help identify prospective facilities. Good community relations are also important in terms of handling zoning hearings and responding effectively to community concerns.
- ***Finding a facility is the longest lead-time item, so begin this process as early as possible.***

ASPIRE SCHOOL OPENING TOOLKIT

Toolkit Contents

- **Prospective New School Summary (Aspire Document)**
- **School Opening Process Chart (Synthesized by FSG)**

Additional Documents (Available Separately)

- **Rubric for New School Openings (Aspire Document)**
<http://www.newschools.org/files/AspireSchool-A.pdf>
- **Growth Options 2007 (Aspire Document)**
<http://www.newschools.org/files/AspireSchool-B.ppt>
- **Sample School Start-up Workplan (Aspire Document)**
<http://www.newschools.org/files/AspireSchool-C.xls>
- **New School Opening Status Report (Aspire Document)**
<http://www.newschools.org/files/AspireSchool-D.xls>



Prospective New School Summary

This is a typical summary document that board members will receive when Aspire is considering opening a new school.

Basic Information		
Site Working Name:	Trinity Lutheran	Proj Opening: Fall 2007
Region :	Central Valley	District: State Charter / Stockton USD
Key Partners:	CDE	

Project Score		
Criteria	Score	Comments
Mission: Student Need	2 Of 2	In downtown Stockton
Mission: Likelihood of catalyzing change	1 Of 1	Aspire's 3 rd school in SUSD
Contribution to facilities portfolio target	1 Of 2	Neutral
Ease of quality control	2 Of 2	Within existing region
Availability of philanthropic funding	2Of 2	Sufficient: CDE, Walton
Favorable chartering environment	0.5 Of 1	Imposes state charter on SUSD
TOTAL	8.5 of 10	

Financials	
Projected facility occupancy costs as % of annual budget: 12 %	
Projected contribution towards Aspire facilities portfolio: \$ 0 per year	
Start-up funds required: \$575k (CDE grant to be received under statewide benefit charter); \$275k in renovations could be financed through CDE revolving loan or with a loan from LIIF or Raza Development	Philanthropy to be raised: \$300K
Scale up shortfall: \$0K	

Facility Description – Trinity Lutheran

Address: 444 N. American Street, Stockton CA 95210	
Description:	Currently used by Aspire as the temporary location for Rosa Parks Academy, which will be moving into a new Prop 47 funded building in the Fall. Church is open to providing Aspire with a long-term lease with options, and an additional building currently used as a day care center (1-2 classrooms) is also included.
Type:	<input type="checkbox"/> District building <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Parochial/Private school <input type="checkbox"/> Adaptive Reuse (former warehouse) <input type="checkbox"/> New construction
Lot Size: ~1.5 acres	Bldg Size: ~20K square feet total
Parking: 22 spaces of parking	Playground space: Small area w/ small structure
Neighborhood: 80% Residential 20% Commercial	
Safety/Security risk: High	Public Transit: Yes
Amenities:	<input type="checkbox"/> Park <input type="checkbox"/> Library <input type="checkbox"/> Community Center <input type="checkbox"/> Other
Overall condition:	Building is about 80 years old and is in fair condition. Classroom spaces are spread out over three small buildings, with a total of 10-11 full size classrooms + admin office + multipurpose room. Would require some work to bring to Aspire functional standard: \$210k for HVAC, flooring, electrical, painting. Remodel of the current day care facility is estimated to be \$65k. Most of the renovations could be completed over the summer in time for school opening.

Projected Student Enrollment	
# Students at full scale: 200	Grade Levels: K-5
Ethnicity: 10% White 15% Black 60% Latino 15% Asian 0% Other	
Socioeconomic: 80% Free/Reduced Lunch	Language: 50% ELL

Nearby elementary schools	1 mile radius: 2,993 total K-5 students					
	Enroll	% F/R	% ELL	State API	SS API	Overcrd?
1. Parklane Elementary (Lodi USD)	603	82%	52%	1	1	
2. Clairmont Elem (Lodi USD)	595	83%	54%	4	4	
3. Westwood Elem (Lodi USD)	658	83%	57%	3	2	
4. Pulliam Elementary	662	91%	20%	3	6	
5. Sutherland Elementary	475	79%	36%	2	1	

Comments:

May draw from both Lodi and Stockton USD; neighborhood elementary schools are mostly large and poor performing.

Effects on Aspire and other Aspire schools

1. May cause some students to stay rather than moving when Rosa Parks moves into its new facility, thus requiring RPA to do even more recruiting to fill the campus (although there should be sufficient demand)
2. Will increase pressure on Aspire to open at least one additional secondary school in the Lodi/Stockton area
3. Will require Aspire to present a new charter to Stockton Unified (not a friendly district) for Langston Hughes Academy (the CSU partnership school, current a satellite of Rosa Parks Academy) and originally planned to be designated a state charter site

Start Up Risks

1. Very tight timeline for facility renovations over the summer (Aspire made no investment in the facility last year, as it was expected to be a temporary location only)
2. Fairly tight timeline to hire principal, recruit teachers and enroll students

School Opening Process Chart

The following chart outlines the key steps involved in each workstream, the timeline for completion, and the primary person or persons responsible for overseeing each step.

KEY STEP	TASKS	COMPLETION TIMELINE	PERSON (S) RESPONSIBLE
Workstream: Facilities			
Identify and Secure Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source potential facilities Ensure adequate space for program Negotiate and sign lease/contract 	9 months prior to school opening if leasing, 3 years prior to school opening if building a new facility	Director of Real Estate
Secure Facilities Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure financing Ensure occupancy cost of less than 10% of ADA revenue 	7 months prior to school opening if leasing, 30 months prior to school opening if building a new facility	Director of Real Estate
Build or Renovate Facility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sign contractors Develop construction documents Attain building permits Ensure key construction milestones are met Negotiate/coordinate daily operations with landlord (if leasing) 	2 weeks prior to school opening	Director of Real Estate, Principal
Workstream: Charter Development			
Prepare and Obtain Charter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine charter approach Submit application 	6 months prior to school opening	Chief Academic Officer
Apply for Charter # and CDS#	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow-up with California Dept of Education Disseminate CDS # and charter # to district, home office and principals 	2 months prior to school opening	Chief Academic Officer
Workstream: Financing			
Develop Financial Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure student demand Ensure scale-up is appropriate 	N/A	Chief Financial Officer
Secure Start-up Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Apply for state and foundation funding Meet Department of Education benchmarks for grant funding 	3 months prior to school opening	Chief Financial Officer
Budget Development and Accounting Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop annual school budget Review finance/accounting policies and practices Meet with district/county re. flow of funds to school 	3 months prior to school opening	Financial Analysts, Grants Accountant

Workstream: Staff and Students			
Hire Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise openings • Screen and interview candidates • Conduct reference checks 	6 months prior to school opening	Chief Operating Officer
Hire Teachers (see Toolkit for <i>Sample School Start-up Workplan</i> for more details)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select and train site hiring committee • Advertise openings • Screen, interview and hire candidates 	1-2 months prior to school opening	Principal
Hire Office Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertise openings • Screen, interview and hire candidates 	2-3 months prior to school opening	Principal
Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct summer training • Identify key areas for coaching 	1 week prior to school opening	Chief Academic Officer
Student Enrollment & Registration (for more details, see <i>Sample School Start-up Workplan</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set enrollment deadlines and objectives • Refine and print collateral materials • Recruit students • Conduct lottery • Register students • Input all student info into power school 	1 month prior to school opening	Principal
Governance and Operations			
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure furniture, fixtures and equipment (FFE) • Order curriculum materials • Establish contracts with vendors 	1 month prior to school opening	Director of Real Estate and Principal
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish site advisory council • Complete memorandum of understanding (MOU) with district/authorizer 	1 week prior to school opening 2 months prior to school opening	Principal