

# THE DEATH SPIRAL

How Charter Schools Can  
Anticipate it AND Avoid It



Nora Flood

Colorado League of Charter Schools

&

Jen Dauzvardis

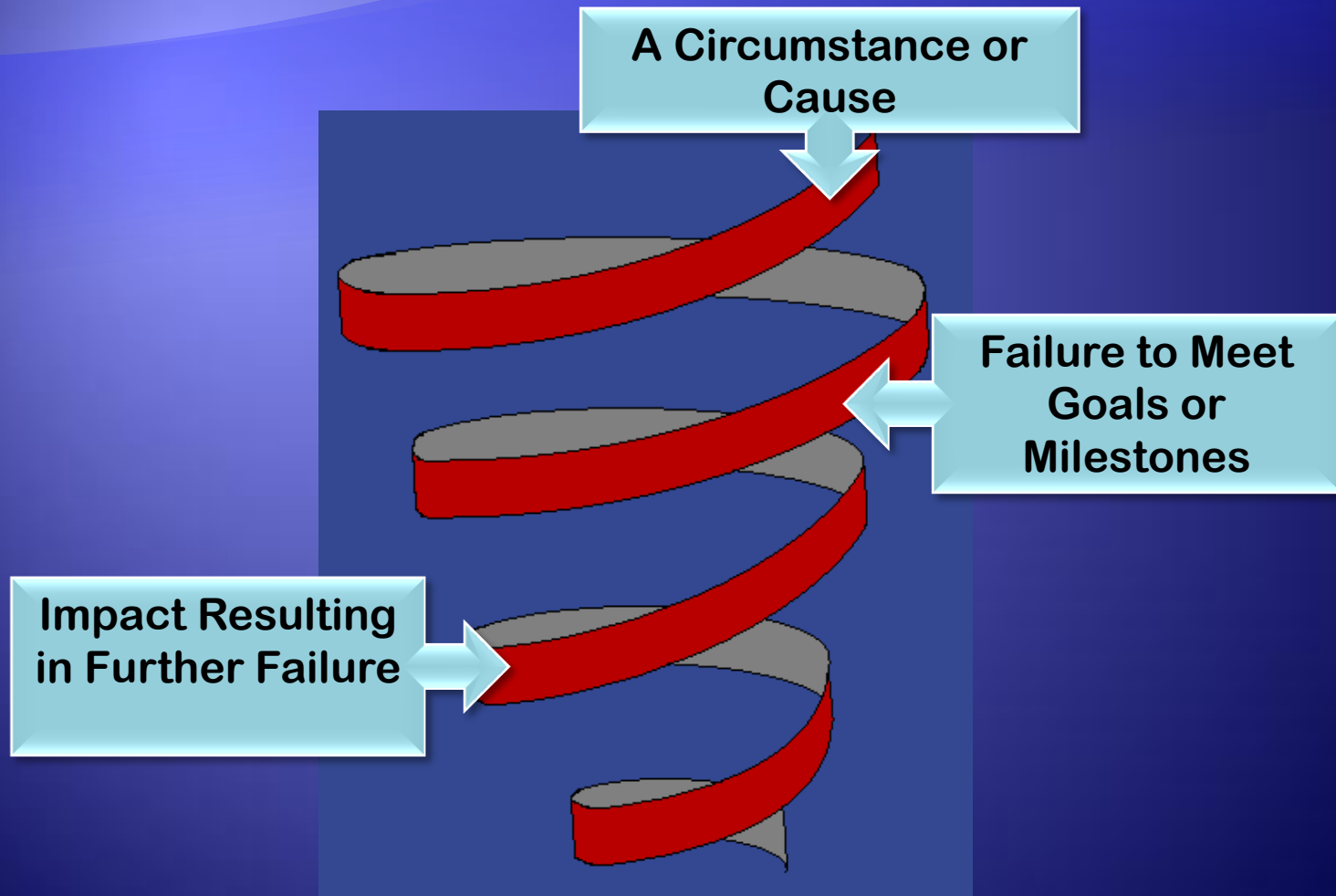
The Center for Professional Development  
at Peak to Peak Charter School



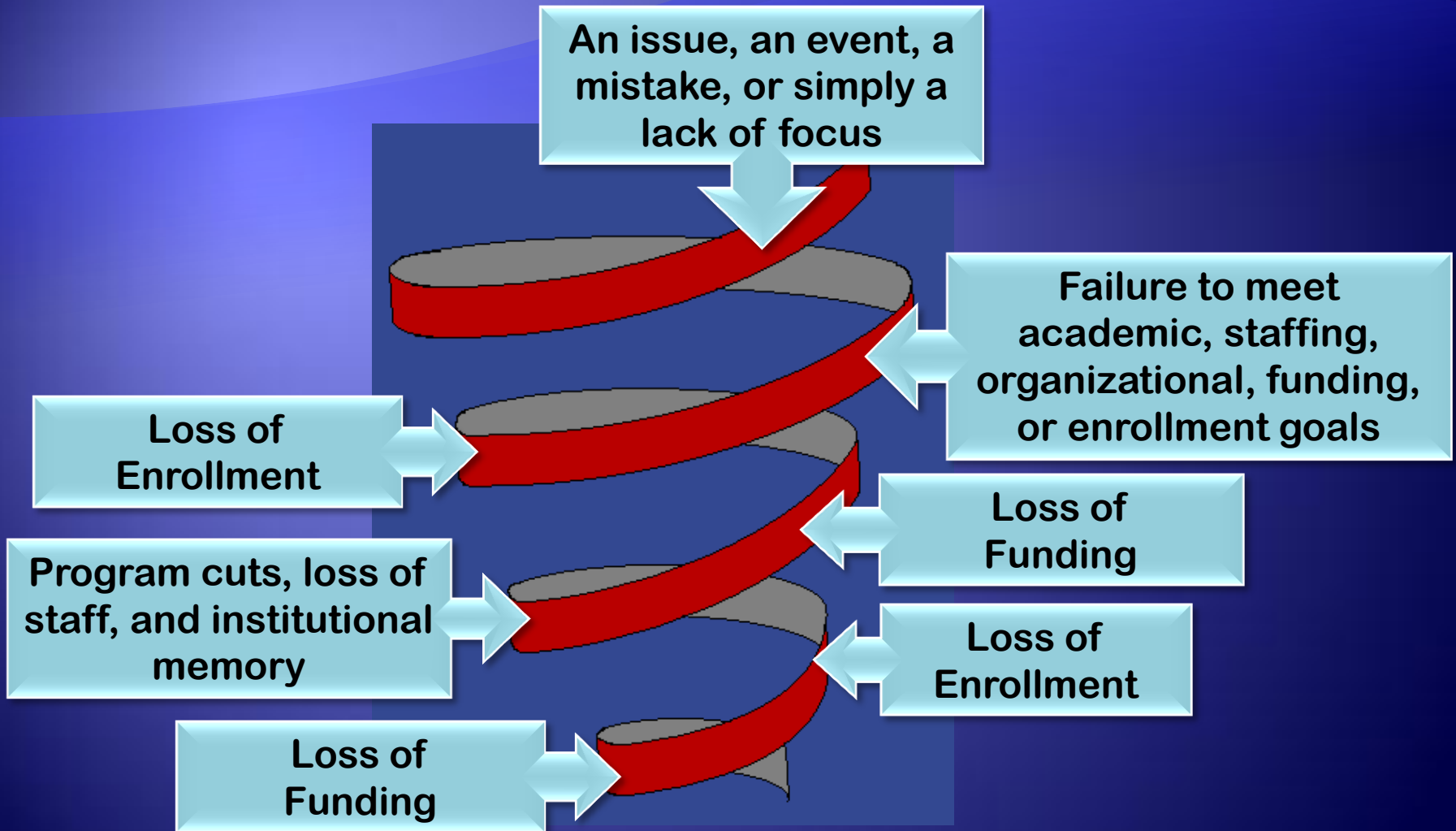
# Essential Question & Objectives

- ◆ What does a “death spiral” look like in a charter school, and what can be done to avoid it?
- ◆ Objectives:
  - ◆ To examine the factors that make a school vulnerable.
  - ◆ To understand how schools can mitigate those vulnerabilities.

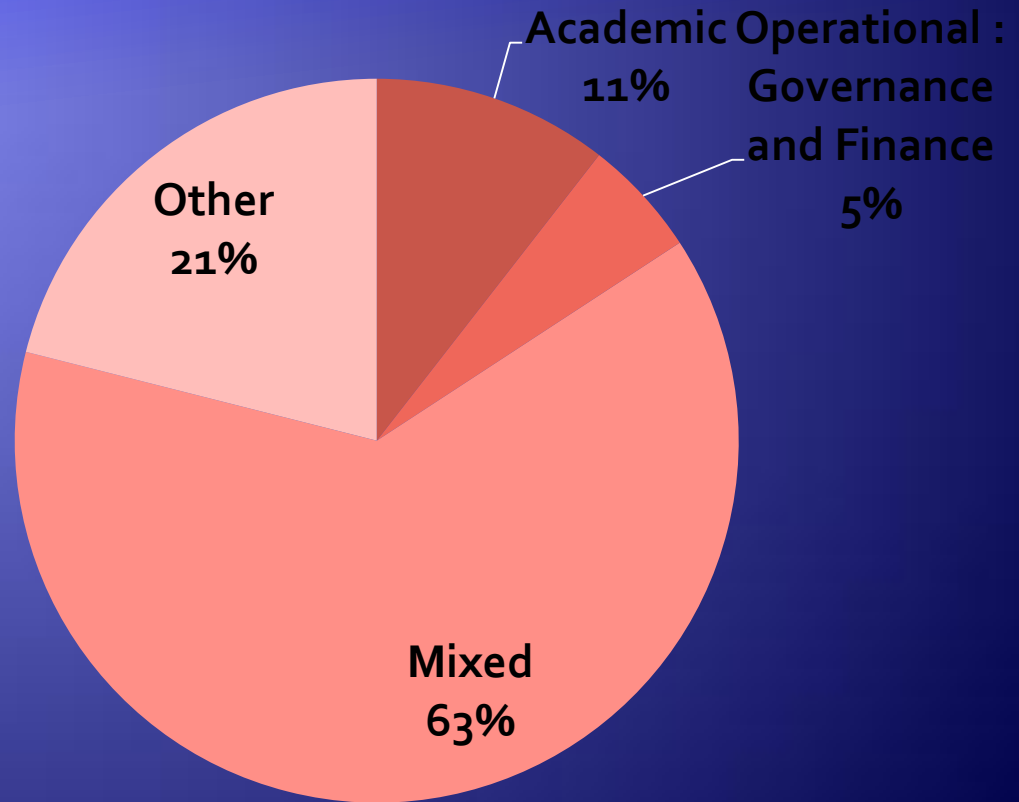
# What is the Death Spiral?



# What does this look like in a Charter School?



# Reasons for Closures



# How does a Death Spiral Start?

Combination of a **situation** and a **trigger**

## Examples:

### Situation

- ◆ Lack of focus on academic goals of the school
- ◆ Weak leadership and lack of professional culture
- ◆ Inexperienced board or lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities
- ◆ Rapid expansion without demonstrated success

### Trigger

- ◆ Poor performance on state standardized testing
- ◆ Low morale, high turnover, loss of institutional memory
- ◆ Ineffective financial management and fundraising
- ◆ Enrollment targets not met

# Common Traits in “Death Spiral Schools”

- Student performance/educational quality never great
- Enrollment declined as years passed
- Declining enrollment caused insurmountable financial challenges
- Weak governance

# What factors perpetuate a Death Spiral?

- ◆ Lack of experience or training
- ◆ Lack of communication
- ◆ Lack of distributed or shared leadership  
(over-dependence on 1 or 2 individuals)
- ◆ Poor planning
- ◆ Lack of sufficient funding
- ◆ Lack of focus



# What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- ◆ Train
- ◆ Communicate
- ◆ Anticipate
- ◆ Put systems in place

# Train

- ◆ Board members
- ◆ Administrators
- ◆ Business managers
- ◆ Staff members
- ◆ Parents and Stakeholders

# Guiding Principles for Training

- ◆ Network with other charter schools and charter school leaders.
- ◆ Attend a variety of trainings and send a variety of stakeholders.
- ◆ Model continuous improvement.

# Board Best Practices

- ◆ Model quality and needs-based professional development.
- ◆ Secure strong relationships within the school and with outside agencies.
- ◆ Understand legislative and legal issues that affect charter schools.

# What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- ◆ Train
- ◆ Communicate
- ◆ Anticipate
- ◆ Put systems in place

# Communicate

- ◆ Internal and External Stakeholders
- ◆ Systems for communicating
  - ◆ Board member ↔ Board member
  - ◆ Board ↔ Administration
  - ◆ Board ↔ Stakeholders
- ◆ Board documents
- ◆ Strategic plans

# Guiding Principles for Communication

- ◆ Set high expectations.
- ◆ Be Professional.
- ◆ Be Transparent.
- ◆ Be Proactive.

# Board Best Practices

- ◆ Promote the vision and mission of the school.
- ◆ Develop and make available all appropriate board documents.
- ◆ Adopt policies in alignment with state laws, state rules, and district policies (unless waived).
- ◆ Develop proactive communication systems.



# What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- ◆ Train
- ◆ Communicate
- ◆ Anticipate
- ◆ Put systems in place

# Anticipate

- ◆ Plan proactively (have a Plan “B”...and “C”)
- ◆ Anticipate potential problems
- ◆ Progress monitor
- ◆ Analyze data and trends
- ◆ Prepare in advance for emergencies

# Guiding Principles for Anticipating

- ◆ Use dashboards to regularly monitor progress.
- ◆ Budget conservatively.
- ◆ Use accountability structures to guide decision making.
- ◆ Make honest assessments.
- ◆ Don't ignore the red flags.

# Board Best Practices

- ◆ Engage in strategic planning.
- ◆ Progress monitor academic programs.
- ◆ Guide program assessment and renewal processes.
- ◆ Monitor and evaluate financial operations.
- ◆ Secure adequate resources for programming.

# What can be done to avoid a Death Spiral?

- ◆ Train
- ◆ Communicate
- ◆ Anticipate
- ◆ Put systems in place

# Put Systems in Place

- ◆ Avoid mistakes in the first place
- ◆ Prevent a slippery slope
- ◆ Use an accountability framework
  - ◆ For academics
  - ◆ For finance
  - ◆ For governance

# Guiding Principles for putting systems in place

- ◆ Distribute leadership.
- ◆ Build capacity within the system.
- ◆ Document decision-making to solidify institutional memory.
- ◆ Focus the work of the board.
- ◆ Establish systems that outlive the skills of individuals.

# Board Best Practices

- ◆ Hire, retain, support, and evaluate the school administrator.
- ◆ Develop and use effective committees.
- ◆ Develop accountability structures , and rely on checks and balances.
- ◆ Develop and document the organizational structure of the board and school.



# The warning signs are there... can we recover once in a Death Spiral?

YES!

- ◆ Requires honest evaluation and willingness to change.
- ◆ Must put what is best for children ahead of what is best for adults.
- ◆ Reach out and get assistance.

# Essential Question & Objectives

- ◆ What does a “death spiral” look like in a charter school, and what can be done to avoid it?
- ◆ Objectives:
  - ◆ To examine the factors that make a school vulnerable.
  - ◆ To understand how schools can mitigate those vulnerabilities.

# Questions?

