

Future Ready Replication Readiness Guidebook

Evaluating Whether Career Connected Charter Schools Are Ready to Replicate

A practical guide for charter school leaders, governing boards, and authorizers

Purpose of This Guidebook

This framework is especially for career-connected charter schools and operates from the assumption that workforce-focused models are fundamentally different from more traditional replication efforts. Of course, the core instructional model still matters greatly, but the success of the school is also tied to external systems that are not entirely within the school's control, such as employer engagement, local labor market demands, postsecondary alignment, transportation access, credential value, and regional economic conditions. Each of these factors materially influence whether a charter school model can succeed in another setting.

Traditional replication reviews often focus on whether the flagship school is high performing. In career-connected models, the better questions are likely:

1. Can the conditions that produce those outcomes be reasonably recreated elsewhere?
2. Do the school's leadership and board understand how much of its success is dependent on local context?

Accordingly, this framework examines two major categories simultaneously: the internal strength and maturity of the school model itself, and the external conditions necessary to sustain that model in another geography.

What We Mean by Replication

For purposes of Future Ready by Design, replication generally means the authorization and opening of a new charter school by an experienced operator seeking to reproduce a successful existing school model. The new school may be located in the same community or state as the original school, or in a different geography.

Replication is different from increasing enrollment, adding grades, adding a campus under an existing charter, or adopting individual practices from another school. It involves taking an established model into a new school setting. Both the operator and the authorizer must therefore determine whether the conditions that produced success at the original school can be recreated.

For career-connected schools, what is being replicated extends beyond curriculum or school design. Success may also depend on employer relationships, work-based learning opportunities, postsecondary partners, specialized staff, facilities and equipment, transportation, local workforce demand, and other conditions that can vary significantly from one community to another. The central question is whether success can travel.

Using This Framework Across States

This guide provides a common national framework for examining replication readiness. It does not replace or supersede state law, charter application requirements, authorizer policies, performance frameworks, contractual obligations, or local approval processes. Definitions of replication, expansion, experienced operator, eligible applicant, and related terms vary across states and authorizers.

Users should adapt the questions, evidence expectations, rating language, and decision points to the legal, policy, funding, governance, accountability, and approval requirements that apply in the proposed location. When this guide differs from a controlling requirement, the controlling requirement governs.

How to Use This Guidebook

One of the easiest traps for schools to fall into is assuming that a successful flagship campus is automatically ready to be replicated. Strong results matter, of course, but they only tell part of the story. Sometimes what looks like a highly transferable model is actually being held together by a small group of exceptional people, long-standing relationships, and local conditions that are hard to reproduce somewhere else.

Increasing the number of high-quality career-connected charter school options is a central goal of the Institute's Future Ready by Design initiative. We believe more students and families, especially those in communities where these opportunities are still limited, should have access to schools that combine strong academics with meaningful preparation for college, careers, and economic mobility.

At the same time, expanding access does not mean expanding as quickly as possible. Opening a new school before the model is truly ready can create real problems for both campuses. The flagship school can lose focus, the new school may struggle to deliver on its promise, and students in both locations can end up with a weaker experience as a result.

That is why replication requires a healthy dose of discipline. Schools need to understand not only what is working, but why it is working and which conditions make that success possible.

A school may be posting excellent results because the founding principal is involved in nearly every important decision. Employer partnerships may be strong because local business leaders have known the school's leadership team for years. The pathways themselves may fit the local economy particularly well. Those are real strengths, but they may not travel as easily as they first appear.

Leadership capacity is one area where schools are often more optimistic than they should be. Starting a new campus involves much more than hiring a principal and securing a building. Senior leaders are suddenly juggling recruiting, fundraising, partnership development, board communication, and a steady stream of unexpected issues. If too much institutional knowledge sits with one or two people, the flagship school can begin to lose momentum just when the new campus needs the most support.

For that reason, school leaders and boards should approach this framework with a critical eye. When there is uncertainty about whether a system is mature enough, whether a partnership is truly durable, or whether assumptions have been fully tested, it is generally wiser to rate the organization more conservatively. A cautious and honest assessment is far more useful than an optimistic one. The goal is not to justify expansion, but to determine whether the organization is genuinely prepared to deliver the same quality of opportunity to students in a new setting.

When replication is approached thoughtfully, it can bring high-quality opportunities to students and families who have not had access to them before. When it is rushed, it can put both schools at risk. This framework is intended to help school leaders and boards take an honest look at whether they are truly ready to grow.

Domain 1 Academic Program and Instructional Quality

The academic foundation of the school remains central to any replication conversation. Career-connected learning should strengthen academic engagement and postsecondary preparation rather than functioning as a substitute for academic rigor.

Areas for examination include:

- student proficiency and growth trends,
- subgroup performance,
- graduation outcomes,
- instructional consistency,
- curriculum alignment,
- intervention systems,
- literacy and numeracy integration within pathways,
- teacher coaching structures,
- assessment practices, and
- evidence of rigorous expectations across both academic and technical coursework.

Domain 2 Career-Connected Learning Design

This domain focuses on the actual architecture of the career-connected model. Reviewers should examine pathway sequencing, credential structures, industry alignment, capstone experiences, dual enrollment opportunities, work-based learning expectations, employability skill development, and pathway completion requirements.

Evidence may include pathway maps, credential crosswalks, labor market analyses, industry advisory materials, dual enrollment agreements, pathway completion data, student internship participation rates, and employer feedback.

Domain 3 Workforce Partnerships

Workforce partnerships should be treated as core operational infrastructure rather than supplemental programming.

Reviewers should examine:

- the depth of employer engagement,
- the number and diversity of partners,
- clarity of partner roles,
- sustainability of relationships, and
- the organization's strategy for developing and maintaining partnerships.

Domain 4 Labor Market Alignment and Regional Demand

Schools should demonstrate that their pathways are grounded in independently validated labor market demand rather than assumptions or trends.

Evidence may include:

- labor market studies,
- job posting analyses,
- employer survey results,
- workforce board recommendations,
- pathway justification narratives, and
- documented employer interviews.

Domain 5 Postsecondary Alignment

Reviewers should examine dual enrollment agreements, articulation structures, transferability of credits, technical college partnerships, apprenticeship sponsors, and alignment between pathway coursework and postsecondary expectations.

Domain 6 Leadership, Staffing, and Organizational Capacity

Growth places substantial pressure on leadership systems, staffing pipelines, and organizational culture.

Evidence may include:

- organizational charts,
- succession plans,
- staffing projections,
- recruitment strategies,
- retention data,
- professional development materials, and
- leadership evaluation systems.

Domain 7 Financial and Operational Sustainability

Replication reviews should examine whether the financial model is genuinely sustainable under realistic conditions.

Evidence may include:

- multi-year budgets,
- financial audits,
- cash flow projections,
- stress testing scenarios,
- facilities analyses,
- transportation plans, and
- pathway-specific operational budgets.

Domain 8 Replication Strategy and Geographic Expansion

The final domain examines whether the organization has developed a thoughtful and disciplined approach to growth.

Evidence may include:

- regional market analyses,
- community engagement summaries,
- local partnership commitments,
- governance planning documents,
- replication timelines, and
- implementation benchmarks.

Concluding Considerations

The strongest replication efforts are usually characterized by realism rather than overconfidence. A rigorous replication readiness process should focus less on whether a school deserves to grow and more on whether the organization has demonstrated the capacity, discipline, and contextual understanding necessary to deliver comparable opportunities and outcomes in another setting.

Replication Readiness Self-Assessment Tool for School Operators

The self-assessment tool is intended to help school leaders and governing boards take an honest look at their organization's readiness to replicate. The ratings are meant to surface areas of strength and areas that warrant additional work before moving forward with expansion.

Rating	Description
4 – Replication Ready	Strong performance and clear evidence that systems are documented, sustainable, and transferable.
3 – Mostly Ready	Solid foundation with some refinements or additional evidence needed.
2 – Emerging	Important elements are in place, but significant gaps remain.
1 – Not Yet Ready	Major weaknesses suggest that replication would be premature.

Domain 1 Academic Program and Instructional Quality

- Have our academic outcomes been consistently strong over at least three years, including for student subgroups?
- Are instructional expectations clearly defined and implemented consistently?
- Have curriculum, assessment, intervention, and coaching systems been codified?
- Does career-connected learning strengthen academic rigor?
- Could a new team reproduce the academic model using existing materials?

Domain 2 Career-Connected Learning Design

- Are pathways intentionally sequenced from introductory experiences to advanced coursework and work-based learning?
- Have we clearly defined the competencies students are expected to master?
- Are the credentials students earn recognized and valued by employers and colleges?
- Can we explain why each pathway was selected?
- Are pathways adaptable to a different labor market?

Domain 3 Workforce Partnerships

- Do employer partnerships involve specific, documented commitments?
- Are partner roles clearly defined?
- Are partnerships institutionalized rather than personality-dependent?
- Do we have a systematic process for developing and maintaining partners?
- Could our partnership model be replicated elsewhere?

Domain 4 Labor Market Alignment and Regional Demand

- Have we used independent labor market data to validate our pathways?
- Are pathways aligned to occupations with strong demand and wage potential?
- Have employers confirmed the relevance of our pathways and credentials?
- Do we understand how local labor market conditions differ in a new region?

Domain 5 Postsecondary Alignment

- Do our postsecondary partnerships support meaningful credit and credential opportunities?

- Are agreements formalized and sustainable?
- Could comparable partnerships be established in another geography?
- Do we track postsecondary persistence and success?

Domain 6 Leadership, Staffing, and Organizational Capacity

- Do we have sufficient leadership depth to expand without weakening the flagship school?
- Have we identified a leader for the replication campus?
- Are onboarding and professional learning systems codified?
- Could we sustain strong performance if the founder stepped away?

Domain 7 Financial and Operational Sustainability

- Is the model financially sustainable without extraordinary philanthropy?
- Have we accurately captured the true costs of delivering the model?
- Have we stress tested the financial model under different scenarios?
- Can we sustain both campuses during the expansion period?

Domain 8 Replication Strategy and Geographic Expansion

- Have we clearly defined why we are pursuing replication?
- Are our non-negotiables and adaptable elements documented?
- Have we conducted a thorough analysis of the target market?
- Has the board established clear criteria for approving expansion?

Authorizer Due Diligence Questions for Career-Connected Charter School Replication

The operator self-assessment is designed to help school leaders determine whether they believe they are ready to replicate. The authorizer's role is different. Authorizers are responsible for independently testing the assumptions behind the proposed expansion and determining whether there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the model is likely to succeed in the proposed setting.

The questions below are organized by the same eight domains used in the replication readiness framework. They are intended to help authorizers move beyond general claims and focus on the evidence that matters most.

Authorizer Mindset for Replication Review

Authorizers have an important responsibility to test whether a proposed replication is likely to succeed, but that responsibility should not become a bias toward approving only models that look familiar. If we want more high-quality career-connected schools to grow, authorizers need to approach these proposals with both rigor and a genuine sense of possibility.

Authorizers should balance legitimate concerns about risk with the potential benefits of the model and the demonstrated demand for it. Responsible authorizing does not mean avoiding every unfamiliar approach or requiring innovative schools to eliminate all uncertainty. It means testing the most consequential risks against credible evidence while also considering student and family demand, community and workforce need, the strength of the operator's track record, and the opportunity the model could create. Risk should inform the decision, but risk aversion should not become the decision.

Career-connected models may organize time, staffing, partnerships, learning experiences, facilities, and measures of student success differently from more traditional schools. Authorizers should seek to understand why those differences exist, how they support the model, and what evidence would

demonstrate that they are working. The goal is not to lower the bar for innovative schools, but to make sure the bar measures the right things.

That means asking questions before drawing conclusions, understanding the role of local employers and postsecondary partners, recognizing meaningful outcomes that may not appear in traditional accountability systems, and distinguishing between a real weakness in the model and something that is simply unfamiliar.

A strong replication review should ask not only “What could go wrong?” but also “What benefits could this model bring, who is asking for it, what need would it meet, and what would have to be true for it to work well here?”

What Authorizers Should Look For

An experienced operator’s track record matters, but past success should not substitute for evidence that the model can work in the proposed new setting. Authorizers should seek to understand both what has made the existing school successful and whether those conditions can be reproduced.

- Evidence that the model works. Strong, sustained academic and student outcomes; meaningful career-connected outcomes; and evidence that success extends beyond one unusually strong cohort or leader.
- A documented and transferable model. The operator can clearly identify the instructional model, pathways, student experiences, and organizational systems that must remain consistent, as well as what can appropriately change in a new community.
- Career-connected learning that is more than a collection of activities. Coherent pathways, sequenced experiences, meaningful work-based learning, valuable credentials, and strong connections between academics and career preparation.
- Partnerships that can survive the move. Employer and postsecondary relationships are institutional rather than dependent on one founder or champion, and the operator has a credible strategy for developing comparable relationships in the new location.
- Evidence of local fit and demand. The proposed pathways make sense for the new labor market; students and families want the model; employers need the talent being developed; and transportation or geography will not make promised experiences inaccessible.
- Leadership and organizational capacity. There is leadership depth beyond the flagship school, a credible new-school leader and staffing strategy, and enough organizational capacity to open another school without weakening the existing one.
- A financial model built for replication rather than copied from the flagship. Projections account for startup costs, specialized staffing, equipment, facilities, transportation, work-based learning, and credentials; enrollment assumptions are realistic; and the budget has been stress-tested against downside scenarios.
- A disciplined growth strategy. The board and leadership can explain why this school, why this community, and why now, and have clear benchmarks that would cause them to proceed, delay, or walk away.

A Simple Authorizer Lens

The detailed due diligence questions that follow can be anchored in four simple questions:

- Is the model real? Is there evidence that the academic and career-connected design is coherent, implemented, and producing meaningful results?
- Is it integrated? Are pathways, academics, staffing, scheduling, student supports, employer engagement, and postsecondary connections part of one coherent model rather than separate activities?
- Is it sustainable? Are the partnerships, finances, leadership, staffing, and operating systems strong enough to endure beyond individual people or short-term funding?

- Can success travel? Can the essential conditions that made the original school successful be recreated in the proposed community without weakening the flagship school?

These look-fors do not replace a rigorous application review. They provide a lens for the detailed evidence questions that follow. Authorizers should independently test the operator's assumptions, assess whether the model is mature and transferable, and determine whether the proposed community offers the conditions necessary for success. At the same time, the review should remain open to innovative approaches and seek to understand how and why the model works before applying traditional assumptions about what a school should look like.

Domain 1 Academic Program and Instructional Quality

- What evidence demonstrates that the flagship school has produced consistently strong academic outcomes over time, including for historically underserved student groups?
- Which instructional practices appear to be most responsible for those outcomes, and how have they been documented?
- To what extent is the academic program dependent on a small number of individuals rather than codified systems?
- How will the organization ensure that academic rigor is maintained while implementing a complex career-connected model?
- What evidence suggests that the academic model can be implemented successfully by a new school leader and staff?
- How will the organization monitor academic quality during the early years of the replication campus?
- What specific aspects of the instructional program, if implemented poorly, would be most likely to undermine student outcomes?

Domain 2 Career-Connected Learning Design

- How clearly is the pathway model articulated from grade to grade?
- What occupations and postsecondary opportunities are students being prepared for?
- What evidence supports the claim that the proposed pathways are coherent and likely to lead to meaningful outcomes?
- Which credentials will students earn, and what evidence shows that those credentials carry labor market value?
- How are employability skills intentionally taught and assessed?
- Which components of the career-connected model are essential, and which are adaptable to local circumstances?
- How will the authorizer know whether students are experiencing the model as intended?

Domain 3 Workforce Partnerships

- What specific commitments have employer partners made?
- How many students can partners realistically support through internships, mentoring, or other experiences?
- How institutionalized are these relationships?
- What evidence suggests that partnerships will endure if key individuals leave?
- How diversified is the partnership portfolio?
- What is the organization's process for developing and managing partnerships in the new market?
- What contingency plans are in place if major partners do not materialize or withdraw?

Domain 4 Labor Market Alignment and Regional Demand

- What independent labor market research supports the proposed pathways?
- How do the pathways align with occupations that offer strong demand and meaningful wages in the target region?
- What evidence confirms that employers in the region view these pathways as relevant?
- How current and geography-specific is the labor market analysis?
- What assumptions about regional demand remain untested?
- How does the organization balance labor market demand with student and family interest?
- What evidence demonstrates that the proposed credentials and experiences are likely to improve students' economic opportunities?

Domain 5 Postsecondary Alignment

- What postsecondary partnerships are in place, and what commitments have those institutions made?
- How will students earn dual credit, articulated credit, or industry-recognized credentials?
- What evidence shows that the proposed postsecondary pathways are accessible and valuable to students?
- How transferable are credits and credentials?
- What assumptions about tuition, scheduling, and institutional capacity underlie the model?
- What differences in postsecondary systems may affect replication in the new geography?
- How will the organization track postsecondary persistence and completion?

Domain 6 Leadership, Staffing, and Organizational Capacity

- Does the organization have sufficient leadership depth to open a new campus while maintaining quality at the flagship school?
- Who will lead the replication campus, and what evidence suggests that this person is prepared?
- How will the organization recruit qualified academic and technical staff?
- What staffing challenges are most likely in the proposed geography?
- How codified are onboarding and professional development systems?
- What succession plans exist for key leadership positions?
- How vulnerable is the organization to turnover among senior leaders or highly specialized staff?

Domain 7 Financial and Operational Sustainability

- Is the financial model viable under realistic assumptions?
- How dependent is the model on grants, philanthropy, or one-time start-up funding?
- Have the costs of equipment, transportation, facilities, and staffing been fully captured?
- How sensitive is the budget to enrollment shortfalls or delays in partnership implementation?
- What differences in state and local funding affect the model?
- Are financial controls and reporting systems sufficiently mature to support expansion?
- What are the most significant operational risks, and how will they be managed?

Domain 8 Replication Strategy and Geographic Expansion

- Why is the organization pursuing replication at this time?
- What evidence supports the selection of the proposed location?
- Which elements of the model are non-negotiable, and which may be adapted?
- What evidence demonstrates authentic community demand?
- What risks are associated with expansion into this geography?
- What milestones must be met before launch?

- How will the board oversee the expansion effort?
- What conditions would cause the organization to delay or cancel the launch?

Cross-Cutting Questions

- What aspects of the organization's success appear to be most dependent on local context?
- Which assumptions are supported by documented evidence, and which rely primarily on optimism?
- If the school were opening without the benefit of the flagship's reputation, would the evidence still support approval?
- What are the most significant risks to students if the replication campus underperforms?
- What conditions or benchmarks should be required before granting final approval?

Potential Conditions for Approval

- Executed employer partnership agreements
- Finalized postsecondary articulation agreements
- Updated labor market analysis
- Identified school leader
- Revised financial projections
- Confirmed facility
- Documented community demand
- Board-approved expansion plan
- Pre-opening benchmarks tied to partnership and staffing commitments

The contents of this guidebook were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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