



Start a School

AN EDUCATION FREEDOM FOUNDATION INITIATIVE

Iowa

Charter Schools

In May 2021, Governor Reynolds signed two bills into law that affect the establishment and operations of new charter schools in Iowa. House File (HF) 813 establishes, and HF 847 amends, procedures for new charter schools effective July 1, 2021, under [Iowa Code 256E](#). A charter school may be established by either a district school board's founding group (i.e., School Board-State Board Model) or an independent founding group (i.e., Founding Group-State Board Model). [Iowa Administrative Code 281-19](#) gives further guidance and direction for the establishment, general operating powers and duties, funding, performance, and oversight of charter schools.

A charter school is a public school that must operate with a governing board, independently of any school committee under a five-year charter granted by the Iowa State Board of Education (State Board). It has the freedom to organize around a core mission, curriculum, theme, and/or teaching method and to control its own budget and hire (and fire) teachers and staff. In return for this freedom, a charter school must attract students and produce positive results within five years or risk losing its charter. There are two categories of charter schools in Iowa:

1. **School Board Model.** A school board may create a founding group to apply to the state board for approval to establish and operate a charter school within and as a part of the school district by (i) establishing a new attendance center, (ii) creating a new school within an existing attendance center, or (iii) converting an existing attendance center to charter status.
2. **Founding Group Model.** A founding group may apply to the state board for approval to establish and operate a charter school within the boundaries of the state that operates as a new attendance center independently from a public school district.

All potential charter schools must complete an application to establish charter school status the year prior to operation. [[256E.1](#), [256E.4](#), [256E.5](#)]

Steps to Start a Founding Group Charter School

Submit a Charter Application

The Founding Group application is to only be submitted by an independent founding group wishing to establish and operate a Founding Group-State Board model charter school independently from the school district. For an application to be reviewed, the independent founding group must complete and submit the application form with all its required attachments.

Applications submitted to the Iowa Department of Education on or before November 1 of the preceding school year shall be considered for approval for the establishment of the charter school for the next school year.

Step 1: Incorporate

The first step in creating a Charter school is to register as a corporation. This is usually a non-profit LLC. Register with your state's Division of Corporations.

Step 2: Obtain Non-Profit approval

If you are planning to operate as a non-profit, you will need to obtain your IRS Non-Profit status by submitting [IRS Form 1023](#).

Step 3: Submit a Notice of Intent to Apply

To ensure timeliness and the complete review of Charter School Applications, a [Notice of Intent to Apply](#) is solicited at least 60 days prior to the application deadline of November 1. For the year 2024-2025, the notice is due on September 3, 2024. Submission of this completed form serves as the official Notice of Intent. Questions about this form may be directed to charters@iowa.gov. Please note that this form is voluntary. Not completing the Notice of Intent to Apply does not make a potential applicant ineligible to apply; however, completing this notice supports the Department in timely and effective review of applications.

Step 4: Attend an Application Support Webinar(s)

Information about Application Support Webinars is provided to any entity that completes the [Notice of Intent to Apply](#).

Step 5: Applicant Office Hours

There may be additional support webinars between August 21-September 30 for potential applicants, which will be communicated to potential applicants if scheduled.

Step 6: Application Deadline

Applicants must complete and submit an application that best fits the selected charter model:

1. [Iowa Charter School Application: Founding Group Model](#) and related [Iowa Charter School Application Guide: Founding Group Model](#)
2. [Iowa Charter School Application: School Board Model](#) and related [Iowa Charter School Application Guide: School Board Model](#).

Step 7: Application Review

All applications will be reviewed by the Department to evaluate charter school readiness and capacity using criteria consistent with nationally recognized principles and standards. The Department Review Team is composed of Department staff who are experts in their respective areas, as well as external members selected based on specific area(s) of expertise as needed for a well-rounded team.

Step 8: Public Forums and Applicant Capacity Interviews

Each application review not only includes a thorough review of the submitted application, but also:

- A public forum, which is an opportunity for local residents of the public school district within which the applicant proposes to locate the charter school to learn about and provide input on each application. Each applicant will be required to hold such a public forum, and provide specific information about the forum date, time, content and attendance to the Department.
- An in-person interview will be scheduled post-review of the application materials.

Additional information about the forums and interviews is provided to applicants during the application review process.

Step 9. Contract Established

If an applicant is authorized by the State Board to be a Charter School, a contract must be on file within 30 days. Technical assistance is provided to authorized charter schools.

Statutes and Rules

- [Iowa Code 256E](#) (256E.5 Founding group-state board model)
- [Iowa Administrative Code 281-19](#)

Resources

Contact Information

Email Address: charters@iowa.gov