

# Identifying Indicators of Distress in Your Schools: A Guide for Charter School Authorizers

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# Introduction

Some schools have trouble attaining and sustaining high-quality programming. To help address this issue, this collection of resources is designed to support charter school authorizers in developing systems to identify when charter schools under their purview are showing *indicators of distress*, which are characteristics that suggest a school is struggling to achieve or maintain high levels of quality. By identifying these early warning signs of institutional decline, authorizers can establish interventions to help schools reverse these trends before they become entrenched.

## What Are Indicators of Distress?

*Indicators of distress* is a term to describe characteristics and patterns that occur early in a charter school's decline. Schools experiencing indicators of distress are generally struggling to achieve or maintain high levels of quality. Indicators of distress encompass not only finite measures, such as not meeting enrollment targets, but also trends and conditions within core areas of school functions, such as continually declining enrollment. Indicators of distress can occur in many areas of a school's operations, including teaching and learning, culture and climate, financial condition and management, board oversight and governance, and organizational capacity and compliance. Indicators of distress tend to be more difficult to measure but easier to influence than indicators of failure, such as academic decline.

## Uses of Indicators of Distress

The indicators of distress can be used as an early warning system for schools. Early warning systems work by enabling users to review data about the outcome of interest and work backward to identify the first signs of that outcome.

**While exhibiting indicators of distress does not necessarily mean that a school will decline and close, identifying these indicators provides authorizers, school leaders, and board members an opportunity to reflect on the underlying factors of these indicators that may need further review.** And for some school leaders and board members, recognizing these symptoms of decline can lead to making major changes to help their schools and students avoid moving from early warnings of decline to actual decline.

## How to Use This Guide

This resource collection consists of three learning modules focused on understanding the indicators of distress, using these indicators to examine the health and performance of charter schools in authorizer portfolios, and embedding the indicators of distress into an authorizer's monitoring and oversight. These modules are most effective when used in group learning sessions for charter school authorizers and their staff or peers. If these modules are used for group learning, groups should choose someone to facilitate.

To assist in facilitation, each module includes an instructional video and access to materials such as a PowerPoint slide deck, participant workbooks, and homework assignments for event participants to complete between sessions.

The modules can also be used by authorizers and others on their own as a solo learning activity.

In fully engaging with the three learning modules, participants will undertake the following activities:

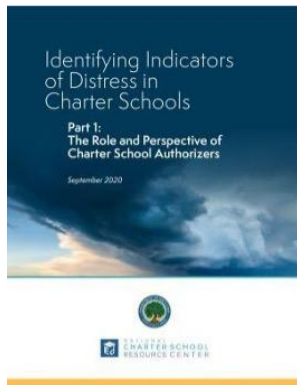
- Strategically examine individual schools and collections of schools through eight organizational lenses: Leadership, Governing Board, Operations, Finance, Talent, Culture, Instruction, and Contextual Factors
- Map their current data collection efforts to the indicators of distress and examine schools that declined in the past
- Examine their present schools to refine their indicators of distress measures
- Determine how to embed indicators of distress into the administrative processes they use to monitor and oversee the quality of their current schools

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## Prereading Materials

It is highly recommended that before engaging with the learning modules, authorizers familiarize themselves with the National Charter School Resource Center's research reports on the indicators of distress. These reports will help authorizers and other participants think more broadly about the indicators of distress on a conceptual level before delving into the mechanics of identifying them in their day-to-day work. This section describes some of the key content from two of these reports.

## Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools, Part 1



[Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools, Part 1](#) serves as an introduction to the indicators of distress. It is designed for authorizers and others who need to be able to identify and understand schools that are experiencing distress long before a state accountability grade designates the school as “failing.”

Based on research literature and interviews with 20 authorizers, this report details the indicators of distress that authorizers regularly encounter as a school’s quality begins to decline. Authorizers and others can benefit from understanding the indicators of distress that often precede a school’s decline before the indicators of failure make themselves known.

The report lists the following indicators of distress, grouped into seven categories:

### Leadership

- Mismatched leadership competencies to context
- Inability to sustain leadership
- Lack of systemic leadership development
- Lack of leadership

### Governing Board

- Inability to convene the board
- The board’s deteriorating relationship with authorizers
- The board’s inability to hold school leaders accountable
- Inadequate board capacity to govern

### Operations

- A breakdown in compliance and reporting functions
- Failure to align to market needs

### Finance

- Failure to properly manage finances
- Misappropriation of funds

## Talent

- Hiring challenges
- Increased/midyear teacher turnover
- Loss of specialty staff
- Decrease in teacher capacity

## Culture

- Poor student/family connection
- Inhospitable professional culture

## Instruction

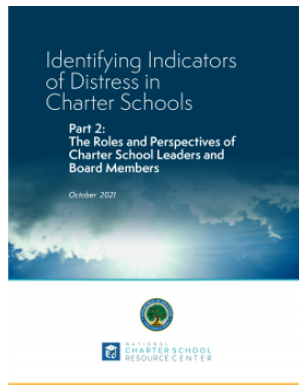
- Lack of focus on instruction
- Lack of cohesion or alignment in curriculum

The indicators of distress listed above are the precursors to the more explicit indicators of failure, which the report details as the following:

- Decline in student achievement
- Decline in student progress
- Decline in student growth
- Decline in graduation rates
- Decline in student safety
- Decline in financial viability

The report urges authorizers to prevent schools from getting to “the point in a school’s decline when challenges, errors, and barriers become too pervasive, systemic, and intertwined with the school’s core functions to allow for easy reversal” (p. 1).

## Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools, Part 2



[Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools, Part 2](#) identifies the characteristics of the indicators of distress from the perspectives of school leaders and governing board members of schools that are beginning to show signs of distress.

The brief concludes with three findings that illustrate ways that schools can mitigate or even stave off distress: preparedness, prevention, and response:

- **Finding #1:** Schools that build robust systems to withstand distress are more prepared to weather it successfully.
- **Finding #2:** Not all challenges stem from within the school walls. Schools that were able to anticipate shifts in their environment were better able to prevent decline.
- **Finding #3:** Schools with the ability to pivot in response to challenges were better positioned for sustainability.

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## Learning Modules

This section presents a collection of resources and correlating guidance bundled into three learning modules. The resources provided in the learning modules were originally used in three live sessions that WestEd held for national groups of authorizers. While the material presented in each module is meant to assist authorizers in holding their own sessions, the resources can also be reviewed and used as part of a solo learning activity. We recommend hosting in-person sessions since peer learning can greatly enhance the discovery process and engagement with the indicators of distress.



**Table 1. Overview of the Three Learning Modules**

Module	Learning targets	Agenda	Time
<b>Identifying Indicators of Distress</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the indicators of distress and distress stratospheres.</li> <li>• Examine a previously failed school in the authorizer’s portfolio through the indicators of distress lens.</li> <li>• Think about the authorizer’s data collection practices and how they can be utilized to look at indicators of distress across groups of schools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why study the indicators of distress?</li> <li>• Early warning systems</li> <li>• Indicators of distress categories</li> <li>• Workbook engagement</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>	120 minutes
<b>Auditing Data Collection and Analyzing Indicator Data Trends</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review indicators of distress and distress stratospheres.</li> <li>• Analyze which indicator categories appear most frequently in authorizers’ portfolios.</li> <li>• Briefly review data categories (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, formal, informal).</li> <li>• Share authorizers’ best practices with each other in each of the indicator categories.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why are we studying indicators of distress? (Review)</li> <li>• Early warning systems (Review)</li> <li>• Indicators of distress—stratospheres</li> <li>• Data collection activity</li> <li>• Data mapping—categorizing your data collection</li> <li>• Independent work</li> </ul>	120 minutes
<b>Assessing and Embedding Indicators Into Data Collection Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and reflect on the data collected from charter schools and how these data may be applied to uncover early signs of distress in schools.</li> <li>• Hear from peers about how they have embedded, or are thinking of embedding, indicators of distress into their monitoring and oversight activities.</li> <li>• Walk away with a plan of action with at least one practical action step to take related to integrating the indicators of distress into their current data collection and review mechanisms.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of Module 1 categories</li> <li>• Review of Module 2 data collection gaps</li> <li>• Review of scale of monitoring and oversight activities from informal to formal</li> <li>• Peer presentations on embedding monitoring and oversight (if applicable)</li> <li>• Independent work: action planning</li> </ul>	120 minutes

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## How to Access the Resources for the Learning Modules

Most of the resources needed for the learning modules are housed on the National Charter School Institute's online Charter Network portal. To access the materials, you will need to create an account. To do this, follow these steps:

1. Go to [CharterNetwork.org/Home](https://CharterNetwork.org/Home).
2. Select one of the following:
  - If you are an Epicenter user, select "Sign in with Epicenter" and log in using your Epicenter account.
  - If you are not an Epicenter user, select "New User Registration" and follow the instructions to create an account. You will then receive an email asking you to activate your Charter Network account.
3. After your account has been activated, log in to the Charter Network, locate "A-GAME" on the homepage, and select "Access" to see the full suite of resources available.

Once you have created an account, you can access specific materials referenced in this document by logging into your Charter Network account and clicking on the hyperlinks in the Resources sections of each of the learning modules below.

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## Learning Module 1: Getting Started With Identifying Indicators of Distress

Learning Module 1 begins with a broad overview of the indicators of distress and how to begin examining your schools for the presence of these indicators. Each participant will examine a school in their portfolio that was previously struggling to identify "look fors" of the indicators. Participants will then use the homework assignment to examine more schools in their portfolios to identify trends in indicators across their schools.

### Content for Learning Module 1

This section provides the agenda for Learning Module 1 and the list of learning resources that you will need to access the module's content.

## Agenda

- What drew you to the indicators of distress? What do you hope to get out of these sessions?
- Why study the indicators of distress?
- Early warning systems
- Indicators of distress categories:
  - Leadership
  - Governing Board
  - Operations
  - Finance
  - Talent
  - Culture
  - Instruction
  - Contextual factors at state, district, neighborhood levels<sup>1</sup>
- Workbook engagement
- Group discussion
- Follow-up “homework” activity

## Resources

The resources you will need to organize Module 1 can be accessed at the National Charter School Institute’s [online Charter Network portal](#) (see instructions in the earlier section, *How to Access the Resources for the Learning Modules*). There, you will find the following resources to guide you through the content of Learning Module 1.

- Session 1 Facilitator Slides (PPT): *Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: Kick-Off Meeting*
- Session 1 Participant Workbook (PDF): *Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: A Supplemental Workbook for Authorizers*
- Session 1 Event Recorded Video

As a first step, watch the Session 1 Event Recorded Video to better understand the structure and flow of the session. The video provides instructions on how best to utilize the Session 1

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<sup>1</sup> While “contextual factors” is not included as a category in the official *Identifying Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools, Part 1* report, we thought it would be important to include some time in this first session to briefly discuss contextual factors (e.g., community, political, and social challenges) that schools may face.

Participant Workbook to begin thinking about how the indicators of distress apply to your local context.

The facilitator of the session should use the Session 1 Facilitator Slides (PPT) to guide participants through the module.

## Key Ideas in Learning Module 1

### Learning Targets

During this module, you will

- understand the indicators of distress and indicators of distress stratospheres,
- think about a previously failed school in the authorizer’s portfolio through the indicators of distress lens, and
- think about the authorizer’s data collection practices and how they can be utilized to look at indicators of distress across groups of schools.

### Big Questions

The following questions anchor the key concepts for this learning module:

- What indicators of distress do charter schools in your portfolio exhibit prior to full school failure?
- What data can be used by charter school authorizers in identifying schools exhibiting these indicators?

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## Guidance for Hosting an In-Person Session

### *Practical Considerations for Facilitators*

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- The overall goals of this session are to introduce and review the indicators of distress (in the beginning of this session) and to give authorizers a chance to apply the indicators (in the latter portion of the session).
- The amount of time dedicated to each of these goals may be determined by the degree to which participants engaged in prereading before the session.
- Be sure to allocate enough time to the group activity since authorizers will be applying a new concept for the first time.
- Be sure that participants have fast and easy access to Tools 1 and 2 in the Indicators of Distress Participant Workbook.

### *Materials for In-Person Sessions*

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- [Session 1 Facilitator Slides](#) (PPT): *Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: Kick-Off Meeting*
- [Session 1 Participant Workbook](#) (PDF): *Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: A Supplemental Workbook for Authorizers*
- Sticky notes (or virtual equivalent)
- Chart paper (or note-taking means)

### *Preparation and Planning*

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- Read through the facilitator's PowerPoint slides for Session 1.
- Choose an appropriate warm-up or icebreaker exercise for the group if you decide to open with one.
- Decide how you would like to group the participants. For this session, single authorizers are generally grouped together to work on a school that they all know well. However, you will need to decide what to do if an authorizer is only represented by one participant or if one group is extremely large.
- Create a feedback survey.
- Send an email encouraging participants to engage with the prereading documents.

## Learning Module 2: Mapping Your Data: Auditing Data Collection and Analyzing Indicator Data Trends

In Session 2, participants analyze and compare trends that they found regarding struggling schools across their portfolios. Authorizers will review the data collected across their monitoring and oversight activities in the following indicators of distress categories: Leadership, Governing Board, Operations, Finance, Talent, Culture, and Instruction. They will also identify areas where they are or are not collecting data pertaining to the indicators found in their schools. The second half of the session is an interactive exercise in which participants share data collection best practices with one another.

### Content for Learning Module 2

This section provides the agenda for Learning Module 2 and the list of learning resources that you will need to access the module's content.

#### Agenda

- Why are we studying indicators of distress? (Review)
- Early warning systems (Review)
- Indicators of distress review:
  - Indicators of distress above the stratosphere:
    - Leadership
    - Governing Board
    - Operations
    - Finance
  - Indicators below the stratosphere:
    - Talent
    - Culture
    - Instruction
  - Contextual factors
- Data collection activity
  - Data mapping—Categorizing your data collection
- Independent work
  - Breakout discussion

- Group #1: Leadership, Operations, lower strata
- Group #2: Governing Board, Finance, lower strata
- Group discussion

### Resources

The resources you will need to organize Module 2 can be accessed at the National Charter School Institute's [online Charter Network portal](#) (see instructions in the earlier section, *How to Access the Resources for the Learning Modules*). There, you will find the following resources to guide you through the content of Learning Module 2:

- Session 2 Facilitator Slides (PPT): Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: Meeting #2
- Session 2 Activity: *Data Mapping Template*
- Session 2 Event Recorded Video

As a first step, watch the Session 2 Event Recorded Video to better understand the structure and flow of the session. The video provides instructions on how best to frame the discussions with your peers or colleagues around data collection and data availability.

If this is for an in-person learning session, the facilitator of the session should use the Session 2 Facilitator Slides (PPT) to guide participants through the module.

## Key Ideas in Learning Module 2

### Learning Targets

During this module, you will

- review indicators of distress and indicators of distress stratospheres,
- analyze which indicator categories appear most frequently in authorizers' portfolios,
- briefly review data categories (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, formal, informal), and
- share best practices with each other in each of the indicator categories (authorizers).

### Big Questions

The following questions anchor the key concepts for this learning module:

- What indicators of distress and distress categories do you see most frequently across your portfolio of schools?
- In what indicators of distress categories are you collecting data most thoroughly? Where could there be data collection gaps or blind spots in your portfolio?

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## Guidance for Hosting an In-Person Session

### *Practical Considerations for Facilitators*

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- The overall goal of this session is to help authorizers think more holistically about the data that they do or do not collect and to apply this thinking to the indicators of distress.
- This session requires a great deal of participation from authorizers since they should be learning best practices from each other. Before the session, facilitators should emphasize to authorizers that they will be sharing their work with other participants so that authorizers have the time to prepare and strategize before the session.

### *Materials for In-Person Sessions*

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- [Session 2 Facilitator Slides \(PPT\)](#): *Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: Meeting #2*
- [Session 2 Activity \(Word\)](#): *Data Mapping Template*
- Sticky notes (or virtual equivalent)
- Chart paper (or note-taking means)

### *Preparation and Planning*

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- For this session, it is helpful to
  - send out a reminder beforehand to complete the presession homework and
  - share the agenda beforehand so that participants can plan their participation in advance.
- Ask each authorizer to bring at least two staff members so that each organization is represented in each of the group discussions. If this is not possible, be sure that someone takes diligent notes in the group in which an organization is not represented (either assign someone from your organization or find a volunteer within the group).
- Feel free to rearrange the topics of discussion in the two groups from what is listed on the agenda.



## Learning Module 3: Embedding Indicators Into Your Monitoring and Oversight Activities

In Session 3, authorizers are encouraged to think more broadly about how they can incorporate the indicators of distress into their monitoring and oversight processes, from informal check-ins with school leaders and governing board chairs to more formal processes such as site visits and performance frameworks. Authorizers will create an action plan for embedding indicators of distress into their monitoring and oversight.

### Content for Learning Module 3

This section provides the agenda for Learning Module 3 and the list of learning resources that you will need to access the module's content.

#### Agenda

- Review of Module 1 categories of indicators of distress found in each authorizer portfolio
- Review of Module 2 data collection gaps identified from the data collection audit
- Review of scale of monitoring and oversight activities from informal to formal
- Peer presentations on embedding monitoring and oversight
  - Ball State University
  - Central Michigan University
- Independent work: Action planning

#### Resources

The resources you will need to organize Module 3 can be accessed at the National Charter School Institute's online [Charter Network portal](#) (see instructions in the earlier section, *How to Access the Resources for the Learning Modules*). There, you will find the following resources to guide you through the content of Learning Module 3:

- Session 3 Facilitator Slides (PPT): *Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: Meeting #3*
- Session 3 Activity (PDF): *Action Planning Template*
- Session 3 Event Recorded Video

As a first step, watch the Session 3 Event Recorded Video to better understand how the two volunteer authorizers conceptualized embedding the indicators of distress into their monitoring and oversight.

If this is for an in-person learning session, the facilitator of the session should use the Session 3 Facilitator Slides (PPT) to guide participants through the module.

## Key Ideas in Learning Module 3

### Learning Targets

During this module, you will

- review and reflect on the data collected from charter schools and how these data may be applied to uncover early signs of distress in schools,
- hear from peers about how they have embedded, or are thinking of embedding, indicators of distress into their monitoring and oversight activities, and
- walk away with a plan of action with at least one practical action step related to integrating the indicators of distress into their current data collection and review mechanisms.

### Big Questions

The following questions anchor the key concepts for this learning module:

- How can you embed “look fors” of indicators of distress within your monitoring and oversight so that you can identify schools in distress in a timelier manner?

In this learning module, two volunteer authorizers—Ball State University and Central Michigan University—present the ways in which they incorporated the indicators of distress into their broader operations. Selected excerpts from their presentations are presented here.

#### Ball State University

Representatives from Ball State University detailed the ways in which the indicators of distress are embedded in their three charter performance frameworks (Financial, Operational, and Academic) and provided examples of indicators that are embedded in their evaluation documents. Additionally, data sources for each of the indicators were provided in the presentation.

#### Central Michigan University

Representatives from Central Michigan University presented on how they utilized the governance indicator as a tool to train their boards and ultimately empower them to achieve a level of operation in which they would be able to see the indicators of distress in their own schools.

These presentations share two possible options for authorizers to embed the indicators of distress within their broader operations.

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## Guidance for Hosting an In-Person Session

### *Practical Considerations for Facilitators*

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- Unlike Learning Modules 1 and 2, this session was delivered in person. The overall goal of this session is to bring the learning from Learning Modules 1 and 2 together so that authorizers can make decisions about how they want to identify schools in distress.
- The video recording of the two authorizers sharing how they have embedded the indicators of distress is best used to convey their reasoning and provide lessons learned about how they came to their respective decisions. The video is not intended as a definitive blueprint for how other authorizers should embed indicators of distress in their work.
- This session requires a great deal of participation from authorizers since they should be moving into decision-making and action-planning mode. Before the session, facilitators should emphasize that authorizers will be making decisions about how best to integrate indicators of distress into their monitoring and oversight work so that the authorizers have the time to prepare and strategize before the session.

### *Materials for In-Person Sessions*

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- [Session 3 Facilitator Slides \(PPT\)](#): Identifying Early Indicators of Distress in Charter Schools: Meeting #3
- [Session 3 Activity \(PDF\)](#): *Action Planning Template*
- Sticky notes (or virtual equivalent)
- Chart paper (or note-taking means)