

Better Choice Foundation's Executive Summary

What is your plan?

- (1) Why do you want to start a school? Identify and describe in detail the problem that you are starting a school to address.

The *Better Choice Foundation (BCF)* was founded in 2011 for the sole purpose of operating charter schools. *BCF* has the philosophy that all children are capable of learning, achieving academic success at the highest levels and are due the opportunity to excel to the highest expectations of learning. *BCF* believes that there are no excuses in the pursuit and delivery of high quality educational opportunities. *BCF* is designed to effectively educate children who are considered “at-risk.” It is our responsibility to make the difference despite all the challenges that a child presents. Poor preparation, family struggles, societal need and conditions of poverty are not excuses we use to account for lower performance. Instead, we build a school around our students, knowing they may come to us with these factors. Our approach is to structure a school that will take all students to the highest academic levels. We will implement many of the same strategies that have been effective in other urban school settings. We supplement the comprehensive curriculum with research-based programs and curriculum materials designed to meet the needs of students who are academically deficient. In addition, our daily schedule includes time to focus on foundation math and reading skills, as well as classes that focus on Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and Grade-Level Expectation (GLE) mastery. These options allow academically “at-risk” students to make multiple grade-levels of progress in one year, mastering foundational skills, while also progressing through Louisiana’s Comprehensive Curriculum.

- (2) Provide the mission of your school.

The mission of *BCF* is to educate, empower and motivate underprivileged children within Orleans Parish to be future leaders of the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana and beyond. *BCF* does this by creating an educational environment that fosters academic excellence, encourages social competence and challenges young minds to exceed the highest levels of educational expectations in every academic field and by infusing our program with the latest technological resources. Students at *BCF* schools develop the academic skills, personal values and intellectual habits of mind to succeed in high school, college and beyond. With integrity and pride, students and teachers focus on results and develop personal and social responsibility to build a better New Orleans for themselves and us all. *BCF* believes, in the broadest sense, that the school is the location where the transformation of society takes place. We take this societal role seriously, endeavoring to create life-changing educational experiences for students and, through this work, transform a city. To this end, we believe it is each school’s responsibility to provide an outstanding, high-quality education for every child who walks through its door.

- (3) Provide a vision for your school that clearly illustrates how your school will put students on a trajectory for lifelong success.

BCF believes that transformation of failing schools is a unique opportunity to quickly turn around the education of many students at once. School transformation is also incredibly challenging, and to that end, *BCF* has developed a deliberate set of strategies that we believe contribute to the success of a PK-8 transformation project.

- (4) Outline the key components of your scale strategy.
- (5) Detail your approach to mitigating the threats most likely to hinder your success.

Based on our own prior experiences in transformation environments as well as research from the transformation movement, we have developed a set of strategies that we believe focus school leadership on the behaviors and activities that will lead to success. Instead of thinking of the project as “school improvement,” turning around a school requires bold action and clear strategy. *BCF’s* transformation strategies are:

- Set Priorities and Minimize Distractions
- Set the School Culture as a First Priority
- Build Unity through a Team Approach
- Invest in Adults
- Provide a Structured Management System
- Drive Student Achievement Through Personal Leadership

Set Priorities and Minimize Distractions

Successful turnaround leaders first set priorities to ensure that they are focusing their efforts and the efforts of the leadership and school faculty on a common set of goals. The work of school transformation is challenging, and without focusing our attention on our priorities, we can get distracted by important, but non-crucial, goals. Successful leaders filter out distractions that do not lead to success on clearly set priorities.

Maintaining a clear focus on priorities in the first year also allows for early, visible wins for the organization and allows staff to build on successes. Staff are motivated by meeting goals and continuing to raise the bar after early successes and they will ensure that the school is continually moving toward its big goals.

In our first year operating *McDonogh 42 (Mc 42)*, *BCF* will set several priorities that will include the following:

- Creating a structured, orderly learning environment
- Dramatically raising reading levels in every grade
- Eliminating the achievement gap in our first class of kindergarteners, sending them to 1st grade on grade level
- Building significant relationships with families, characterized by frequent contact from school leadership early in the year

Concentrating on key levers to school success and motivating staff around several clear goals will help us use resources and time on strategies that will have the most impact.

Set the School Culture as a First Priority

We believe that creating a structured, orderly learning environment is crucial to transforming a school and we also believe that this is so important that it should be a first priority. There are those who believe a school will gradually improve, becoming more structured over the course of the first year. We disagree. School culture must be established within the first month of school in order to clearly communicate high expectations for all students and move on to focus on academics. Of course, there will always be students who behave outside the boundaries of what is acceptable, but when the majority of students are engaged with the teacher, the school can make huge academic gains. Without constant attention to setting and

keeping the bar high, the proper culture does not get set. In schools where high standards aren't maintained after the first week of school, constant "re-sets" are necessary. Teachers are focused for too long on the daily battle of classroom management instead of instruction and burnout sets in. We want to create an orderly and structured environment as soon as possible so teachers and students can enjoy their time together focused on learning.

Build Unity through a Team Approach

We believe in the power of a team approach to building a strong school. When a team of teachers has the same standards, procedures and expectations for behavior and culture, students know what to expect in every classroom and experience more success. Establishing a common language, collective vision, and shared direction is the responsibility of the school Principal, and this effort drives student achievement. A successful school team will do the same kind of planning to meet the needs of their grade level of students.

Each team at the school will spend significant planning and collaboration time each day handling the day-to-day workings of their team. This could include any of the following:

- Perfecting transitions to class, lunch, recess, and arrival/dismissal
- Discussing difficult students and strategizing together to ensure success of students
- Identifying students who need special services or just more attention from staff
- Collaborating on field trip plans and procedures
- Looking at student work together to ensure that each teacher is keeping expectations high for meeting the standard
- Streamlining procedures for report card distribution to ensure more parent time with teachers
- Sharing ideas for making science instruction more interactive

Creating tight routines and an organized school experience is so important to us that we believe time should be built into every school day to ensure teachers have the professional time to do this work. From 4:00-5:00 each day, teams are required to meet. Though we know that an extra 30 minutes of instruction each day can make a difference for children, we believe that dedicating this time to teacher collaboration will actually create a more positive and effective learning environment every day.

Invest in Adults

The *Better Choice Foundation (BCF)* believes that people make the difference and great people make an even bigger difference. We aim to include the appropriate staffing structure to meet the needs of our students and develop those staff members so they are helping our students reach the highest levels of achievement.

We understand and anticipate the variety of challenges our students will bring with them to school. We also believe it is our responsibility to educate and nurture each child, no matter their circumstances. Because of this commitment to each child and each family, we plan to staff our school with people in place to meet student needs. At *Mc 42*, we will build a team of staff around each student with highly-effective systems for assessing and serving that student's needs.

When taking over an entire school, there is often a lack of teacher capacity to attend to every student or family issue that arises. This is natural in a turnaround environment, but it seriously undermines the school's ability to serve students. Our experience reveals that time and attention to students and parents is a critical factor in building buy-in and meaningful relationships between adults and students.

Successful schools have adequate student support professionals to address the variety of needs that students present. Because we don't know the specific special education needs, emotional needs, or

socioeconomic needs of each of our families in the school, we plan to thoughtfully add additional staff in these areas to ensure that students are served well.

More than any other factor, caring, highly-skilled adults make the difference in a child's life. At *Mc 42*, *BCF* intends to allocate our resources to developing the people in our building so they can best serve the needs of our students. In the first few years, we will hire additional staff to ensure that every teacher has the time to address all student issues, from making a parent call to report a good day or talking through a conflict with two students. We believe that talented people will make a huge difference in our students' lives and we want to give them the training and the time to do that well.

Provide a Structured Management System

BCF believes that structured management systems will ensure success in a turnaround environment by eliminating any ambiguity with respect to expected outcomes for each employee. The transformation environment can be fast-paced and unstable. At *Mc 42*, we will create a management hierarchy designed to streamline communication and promote accountability. It will be clear to each employee who his or her immediate supervisor is, and to reduce redundant work or inaction because of confusion, we will ensure that everyone has one primary supervisor. In addition, having one building Principal who is responsible for everything in the building builds a culture of accountability.

Drive Student Achievement Through Strong Principal Leadership

The research on school turnaround, as well as our own experiences in transformation environments, acknowledges the significant role the school leader plays in the success of the school. In a transformation environment, the school Principal's leadership has more of an effect because staff need direction. The Center on Innovation and Improvement has identified several Leader Actions that contribute to success in a transformation school setting.¹ Key among these is having the Principal take personal responsibility for the school, including all aspects of student achievement. In addition, successful school leaders communicate a positive, compelling vision of the school, which motivates and leads the staff to embody the values and mission of the school. Rather than being an office-bound administrator, *BCF's* Principals are engaged, visible and completely accountable leaders within the school community.

How will you measure your plan's success?

- (1) Describe the performance goals that you will achieve to put students on the path towards achieving your vision. Provide the baseline data used in establishing all performance goals. Include the goals that you will reach in years one through five, the length of your first charter contract.

Orleans Parish Specific Questions

1. How will you evaluate school performance?
2. What are performance goals for year 1 through 5? How did you get to these goals?
3. What is your capacity to effectively measure success?
4. What will you do to address performance if you fall below these targets?

¹ Brinson, D., Kowal, J., & Hassel, B. of Public Impact., *School Turnarounds: A Review of the Cross Sector Evidence on Dramatic Organizational Improvement*. Lincoln, IL: Center on Innovation and Improvement. (2007)

In our first year of operation, *BCF* expects to make our Growth Target and receive the label of a Top Gains school. Based on where *Mc 42*'s SPS score is in 2016, we expect to make significant academic growth and be on track to reach an SPS of 100 by the year 2020. Our internal goals include ambitious student achievement targets that exceed the state expectations of growth in the first year. We expect to meet our own goals in the first year of operation and continue to see significant growth each year thereafter. Our goals are as follows:

Goal #1: Students at *Mc 42* will consistently score above the RSD average in all subjects (ELA, math, science, social studies) of the state's LEAP 2025 summative assessment.

Goal #2: *Mc 42* will increase the percentage of students scoring at or above basic levels on the LEAP 2025 assessments by 10% – 15% each school year.

Goal #3: 80% - 90% of students enrolled for three consecutive years at *Mc 42* will perform at basic, mastery or advanced status in ELA and mathematics in the state's annual LEAP 2025 summative assessment.

Goal #4: *Mc 42* will retain at least 85% of its enrolled students from year-to-year during its first two years of operation under *BCF*.

Goal #5: *Mc 42* will demonstrate an 85% overall satisfaction rating in an annual survey administered to parents or designated legal guardians of students attending the school during each academic year.

In the event that *Mc 42* does not meet our own internal goals and standards for student performance, we will immediately take corrective measures, utilizing all resources (the Board of Directors, theory, research, and faculty/staff input) to re-focus ourselves on our vision and mission, thus taking action to make the necessary changes to produce desired results.

Why is your school critical for New Orleans?

Orleans Parish Specific Questions

1. What about your school positions it to uniquely address the needs you have identified?

The *Better Choice Foundation (BCF)* is designed to effectively educate children who are considered “at-risk.” We implement and employ many of the same strategies that have been effective in other urban school settings. We supplement the comprehensive curriculum with research-based programs and curriculum materials designed to meet the needs of students who are academically deficient. In addition, our daily schedule includes time to focus on foundation math and reading skills as well as classes that focus on Common Core State Standards and GLE mastery. These options allow academically “at-risk” students to make multiple grade-levels of progress in one year, mastering foundational skills while also progressing through Louisiana's Comprehensive Curriculum. Additionally, our extended day allows for daily one-on-one tutoring and remediation designed to meet the needs of each individual child.

2. What do you know about the families you will serve? What do you know about other schools you may compete with? How will your school be competitive in New Orleans and attract families?

McDonogh #42 (Mc 42) currently serves 501 PK-8 students and its population is comprised of students who reside within Orleans Parish. Specifically, 24% of *Mc 42*'s students are attending the school closest to home, compared to 15% of students overall in New Orleans. 97.6% of *Mc 42*'s students are considered “economically disadvantaged.” 1.6% are English Language Learners and 11% are Special Education students. The schools closest to *Mc 42* are *Phyllis Wheatley*, a “D” school, *Esperanza*, a “C” school, and

Morris Jeff, a “B” school. In terms of competing with other schools, historically, *Mc 42* has done a good job of attracting and maintaining a core student body. These students and their families have endured the transition from the *Treme’ Charter School Association* to the *Choice Foundation* and, now, to a new operator. If *BCF* is selected as the new operator for *Mc 42*, our first priority will be to maintain its existing student population. Currently, *Mc 42* has 501 students, per the 10/1/16 count, with a maximum program capacity of 538 students. *BCF’s* first goal will be to canvas the 70119 zip code and “recruit” students and their families, to incentivize current students to continue with *Mc 42* and to sell parents on prioritizing *Mc 42* through the *OneApp* process.

3. Who will your school collaborate with? What community support has the school generated? Who will your school work with to be well positioned within the city and community?

BCF has always had a very good reputation in the community. We are committed to forming partnerships with the business community to enhance the quality of education and support services for our students. We attend neighborhood association meetings and encourage members of those neighborhood associations to join the *BCF* Board of Directors and fully engage in our mission. The Board is committed to seeking out additional partnerships to promote community involvement and will actively network with outside organizations who can partner with us to provide encouragement, support and activities which will promote student achievement.

4. What external factors does the school expect to face in opening in Fall 2017 in New Orleans? How does the school expect to address these external factors?

The chief external factor that *BCF* anticipates in opening *Mc 42* in the fall of 2017 is garnering the necessary parental, community and stakeholder support that is necessary in order for the school to be successful. To that end, the *Recovery School District* has already begun facilitating the process, using the transformation of *Andrew J. Wilson* as a model, by putting *BCF* in contact and dialogue with community groups such as *OPEN*, the *Urban League*, *Citizens for 1 Greater New Orleans*, *Stand for Children* and *Nuestra Voz/Our Voice* and *The Advocators*. *BCF* would like to continue to extend the dialogue with these entities, and more, but, more importantly, *BCF* will “camp out” in the community in the spring and summer months of 2017, hosting town hall-style meetings and informational sessions regarding *Mc 42’s* transformation. It is important for parents to know essential they are to the process, so it is important for them to have a venue through which they can be heard. Also, *BCF* will begin rolling registration/orientation sessions with parents.