Model Prep Guide

Everything to pull together before you sit down to build your school's one-year budget or multi-year model.

Most founders walk into the model wizard and bounce back out because they don't have the numbers in front of them. This guide lays out, in the same order as the wizard, exactly which documents to gather and which decisions to have an opinion on. Print it, mark it up, and bring it with you when you sit down to build. You don't need every answer to start; smart defaults and "I don't know yet" options are everywhere. But the more of this you have ready, the faster the build goes and the stronger your model will be.

Already picked your pathway? The wizard's "Prep guide" download card serves a streamlined variant for your school type, launch status, and budget horizon - no "skip this section" callouts to filter through.

Print on letter-size paper. Reads cleanly in black & white.

At a glance - one-page checklist

Tear this page off and tape it next to your computer. The rest of the guide walks each section in detail.

Before you start

- ☐ A few focused sittings, you don't have to finish in one go
- ☐ A folder (digital or paper) with the documents below
- ☐ Your best estimates, exact numbers can come later

Documents to have nearby

- ☐ Lease or LOI for your facility (or a rent estimate)
- ☐ Most recent payroll register or staffing plan
- ☐ Last year's P&L and balance sheet (if already operating)
- ☐ Loan term sheet or quote (if you're financing capital)
- ☐ Any grant award letters, ESA / voucher rules, per-pupil rates

Decisions to have an opinion on

- ☐ Year-1 enrollment target by grade
- ☐ Tuition (and any sibling / financial-aid discounts)
- ☐ Founder + leadership salaries (market rate)
- ☐ Teacher salary band and student-to-teacher ratio
- ☐ How much capital you're putting in vs. borrowing

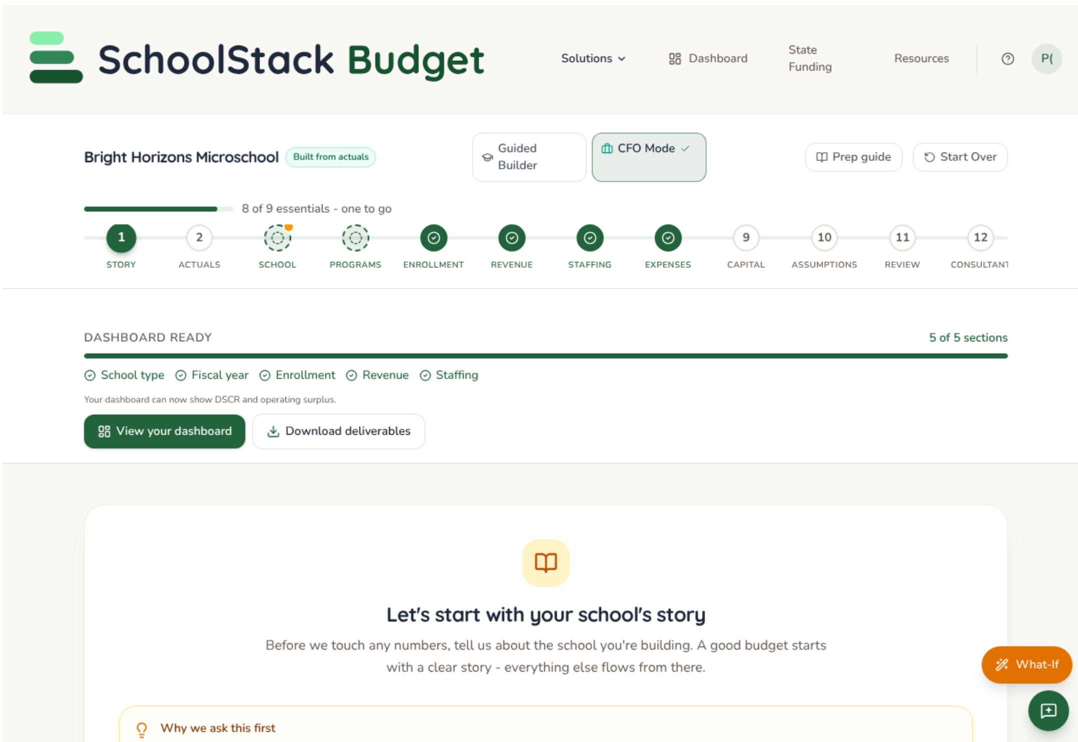
What's inside

Sections follow the wizard in order. Skip the "Already Operating" section if your school hasn't opened yet.

WIZARD STEP

Story, Let's start with your school's story

A handful of plain-language questions about the school: type, name, who it's for, and where you are in your launch journey. No numbers required. This is what every coaching tip the wizard shows later keys off, so it's worth doing thoughtfully.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ A working name for the school (you can change it later)
- ☐ A one-sentence description of the model you're building
- ☐ Notes on which families you're serving and what makes the school different

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ School type: charter, private, microschool, pod, co-op, tutoring center, or Chesterton Academy
- ☐ Where you are: still planning, opening soon, or already operating
- ☐ Whether you're a sole practitioner, LLC, partnership, or 501(c)(3)
- ☐ Your comfort level with financial modeling (Guided Builder vs. CFO Mode)

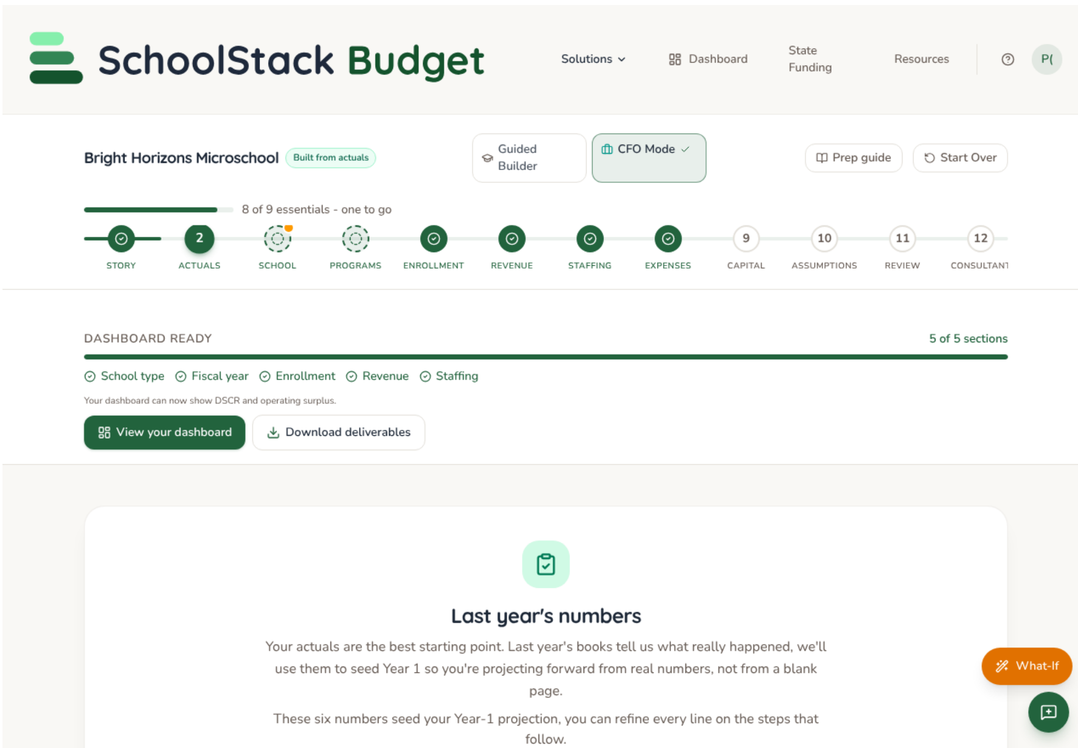
> **Tip**
>
> If you're already operating, the wizard inserts an "Actuals Intake" step right after this one so it can seed Year 1 from your real books. The next section of this guide is exactly that step.

WIZARD STEP

Actuals Intake, Last year's numbers

Appears for operating schools only, skip if you haven't opened yet.

Sits right after Story for operating schools. The wizard pulls your prior-year actuals (from a P&L upload or manual entry) and uses them to seed Year 1, so your projections start from real history instead of a blank slate.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- [ ] Last fiscal year's profit & loss statement (P&L)
- [ ] Last year's balance sheet, especially cash on hand, restricted vs. unrestricted
- [ ] Last year's payroll summary by role
- [ ] Last year's enrollment count by grade as of October 1 (or your state's audit date)
- [ ] Bank statements or accounting export covering the last 12 months

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- [ ] Which prior fiscal year you're using as the baseline
- [ ] Whether to upload a QuickBooks / Xero export or enter line items manually
- [ ] How to allocate any one-time items (startup grants, capital campaigns) so they don't distort Year 1 trends

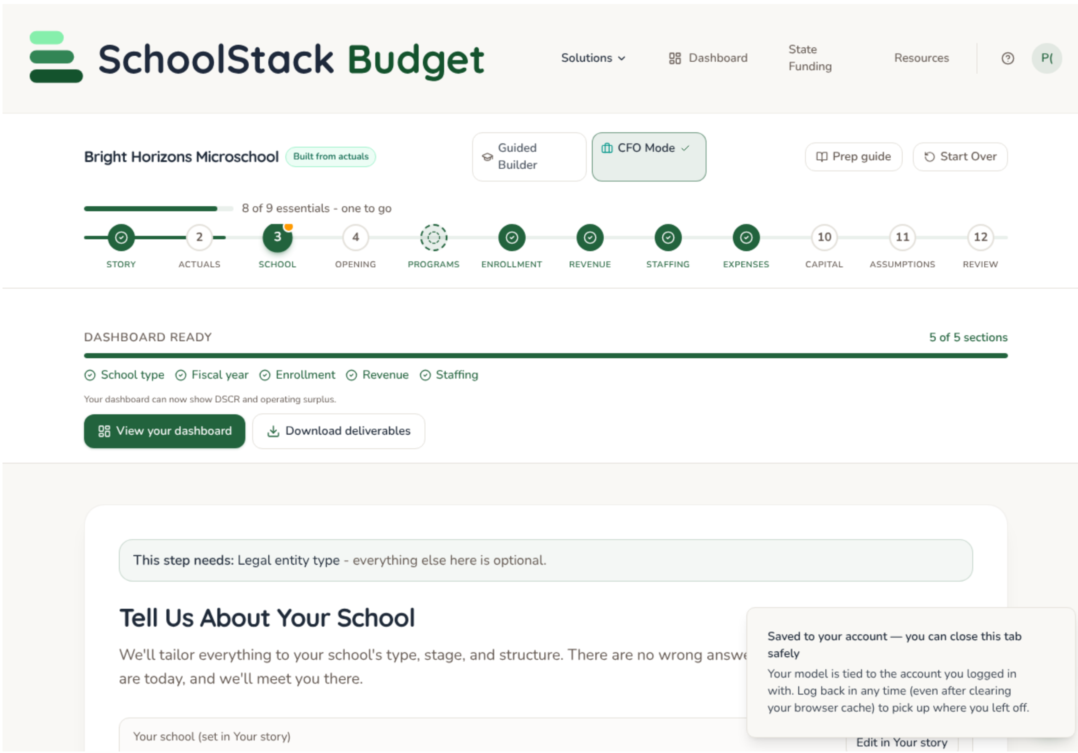
Tip

If you have a bookkeeper, ask them to send the trial balance or a categorized P&L, it's the single fastest way through this step.

WIZARD STEP

School Details, Tell us about your school

State, opening year, fiscal-year start, and building capacity. The wizard uses these to pick sensible defaults (per-pupil rates, payroll tax rules, calendar) so you're not starting from a blank sheet.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Articles of incorporation or LLC paperwork (for the entity type)
- ☐ Lease or LOI showing the building's permitted occupancy
- ☐ Your fiscal-year start month (most schools use July)

Numbers & decisions to have ready

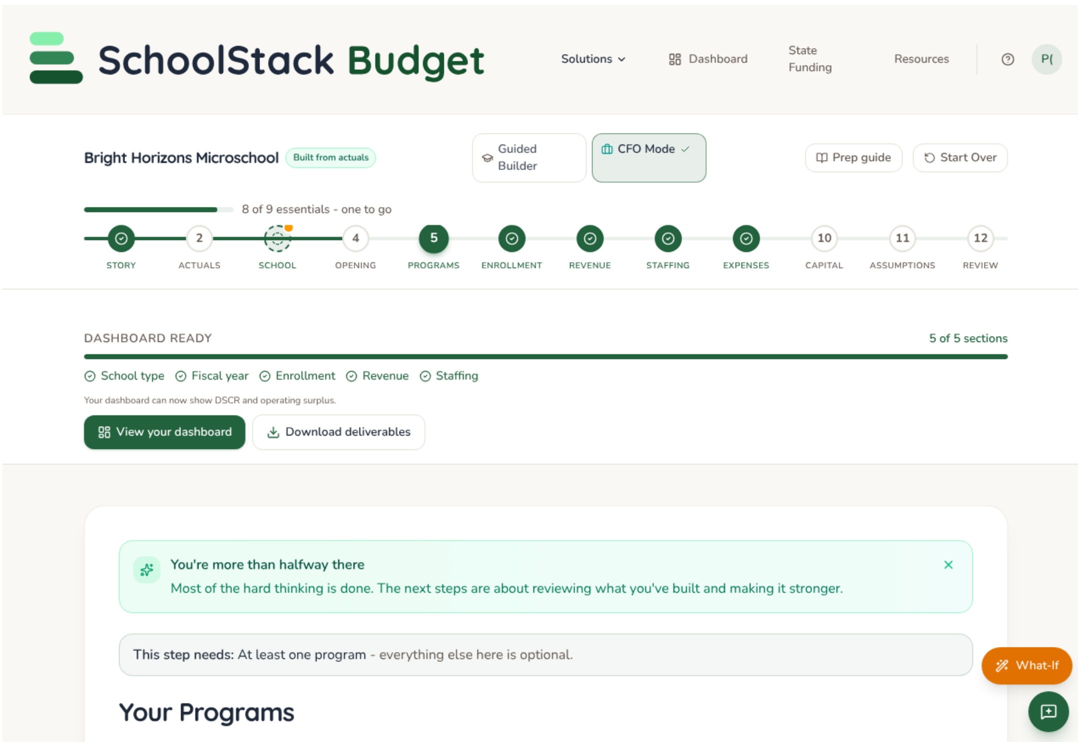
- ☐ What state the school is in
- ☐ Year you plan to open (or current operating year)
- ☐ Maximum capacity of your building once fully built out
- ☐ Whether Year 1 is a partial year (and if so, how many operating months)

WIZARD STEP

Enrollment, Programs & enrollment

Standard pathway. Chesterton Academy schools see the phased four-grade plan below instead.

The single biggest driver of every other number in the model. The wizard lets you enter enrollment by grade and ramp it across five years, so this is the place to be honest about how fast you can really fill seats.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Waitlist or interest-list counts, if you have them
- ☐ Demographic data on school-age children in your service area
- ☐ Notes from any open houses, info sessions, or family interviews

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Year-1 enrollment target, broken out by grade
- ☐ How many grades you'll serve in Year 1 (and which you'll add in Years 2-5)
- ☐ A realistic re-enrollment / retention rate from year to year
- ☐ Class-size cap or student-to-teacher ratio you're committed to

Tip

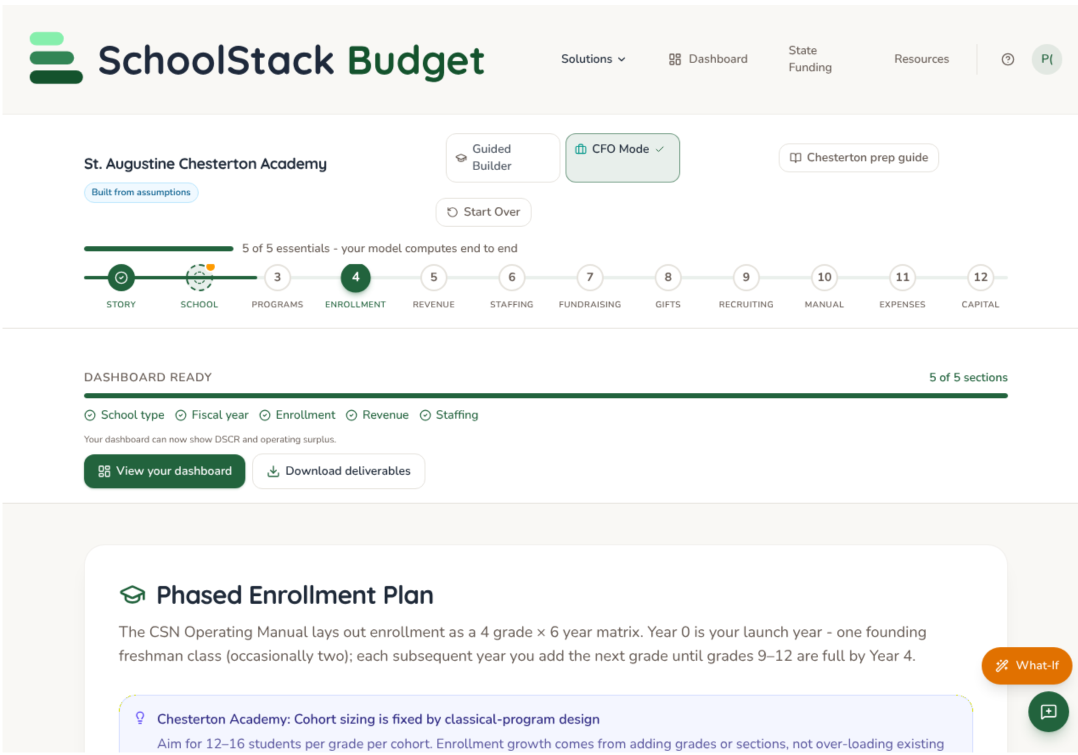
Lenders and boards will probe your enrollment ramp harder than any other input. Be ready to defend it.

WIZARD STEP

Enrollment, Phased Enrollment Plan

Chesterton Academy only, skip if your school type is anything else.

Replaces the standard Enrollment step for Chesterton Academy launches. The CSN Operating Manual lays out enrollment as a 4-grade × 6-year matrix: Year 0 is the launch year (one or two freshman classes), and each subsequent year you add the next grade until grades 9–12 are full.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Your draft freshman-class commitments (one or two sections in Year 0)
- ☐ Notes on your feeder schools and the parishes you're recruiting from
- ☐ Any historical attrition data from peer Chesterton schools

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Planning Year, the fall the school year begins (e.g. 2027 = 2027–28)
- ☐ Year-over-year attrition rate (decimal, e.g. 0.10 = 10%)
- ☐ Number of sections per grade in each year of the ramp
- ☐ Whether to launch with one or two freshman cohorts

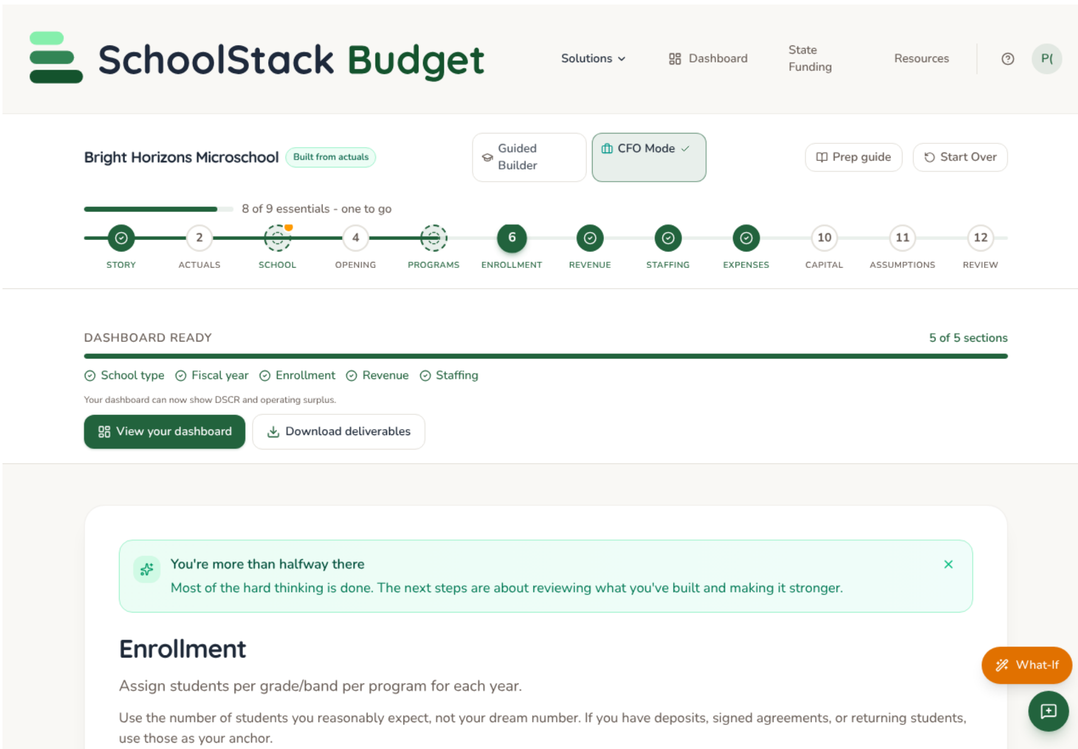
Tip

The Year-6 "fully ramped" total is what every downstream number scales to. If that number scares you, walk the matrix backwards before moving on.

WIZARD STEP

Revenue, tuition, funding, grants, donations

Every dollar coming in: tuition, ESA / voucher payments, charter per-pupil funding, grants, donations, ancillary fees. The wizard handles discount tiers (sibling, financial aid) and collection timing too, so bring your real pricing schedule if you have one.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Your published or proposed tuition schedule (with discounts)
- ☐ Per-pupil funding rates for your state (charter)
- ☐ ESA / voucher amounts and eligibility rules (if applicable)
- ☐ Grant award letters or pledges from named donors
- ☐ A copy of your fundraising plan or development calendar

Numbers & decisions to have ready

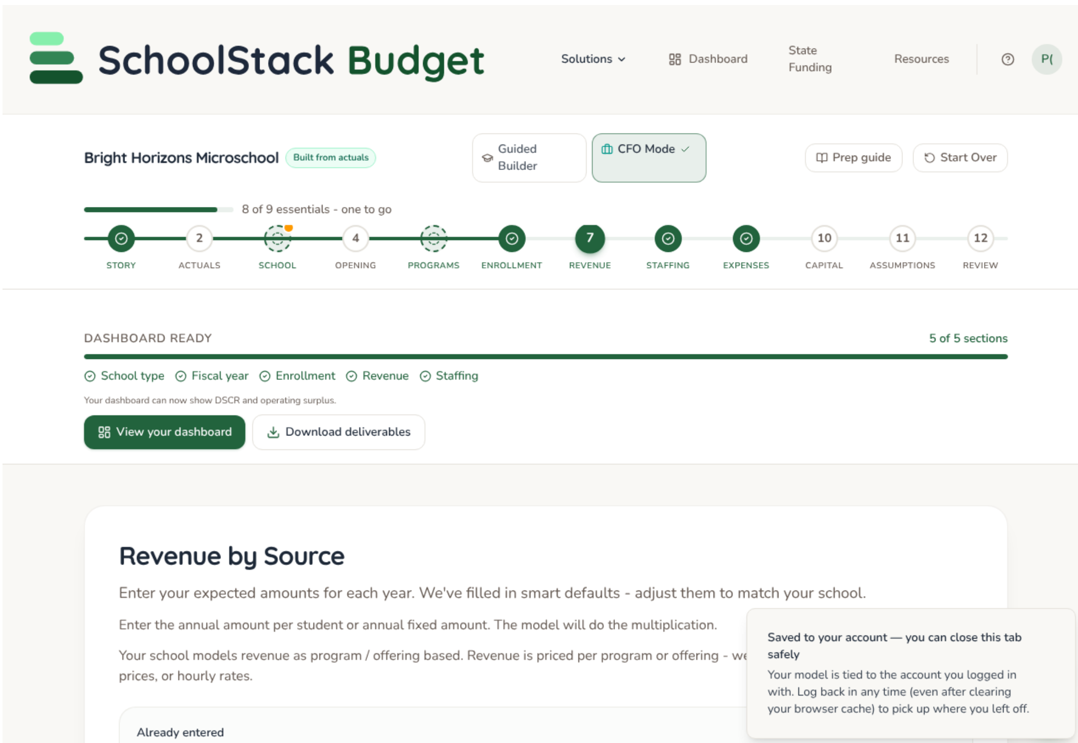
- ☐ Tuition rate per student (or by grade band)
- ☐ Financial-aid discount: percent of families and average award
- ☐ Sibling discount, if you'll offer one
- ☐ Realistic tuition collection rate (95-98% is typical)
- ☐ Any non-tuition revenue: aftercare, summer programs, fees

WIZARD STEP

Staffing, every role, every salary

Standard pathway. Chesterton Academy schools see the periods-based salary schedule below instead.

Teachers, leadership, admin, support staff, contractors. The wizard tracks each role's FTE, salary, benefits, and payroll tax. Staffing is usually 50-70% of total spending, so getting this section honest is what separates a model that survives from one that doesn't.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Your most recent payroll register (if operating)
- ☐ Salary benchmarks for teachers in your area (state DOE data, NAIS, NCES)
- ☐ Benefits quote: health, dental, retirement match
- ☐ Job descriptions for any roles you haven't hired yet

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Founder / head-of-school salary at market rate (not founder discount)
- ☐ Teacher salary band, starting salary and top of scale
- ☐ Number of teachers in Year 1, plus any aides or specials staff
- ☐ Admin and operations roles you'll need (registrar, ops manager, etc.)
- ☐ Benefits load: usually 18-25% on top of base salary
- ☐ Annual raise assumption (3% is typical)

Tip

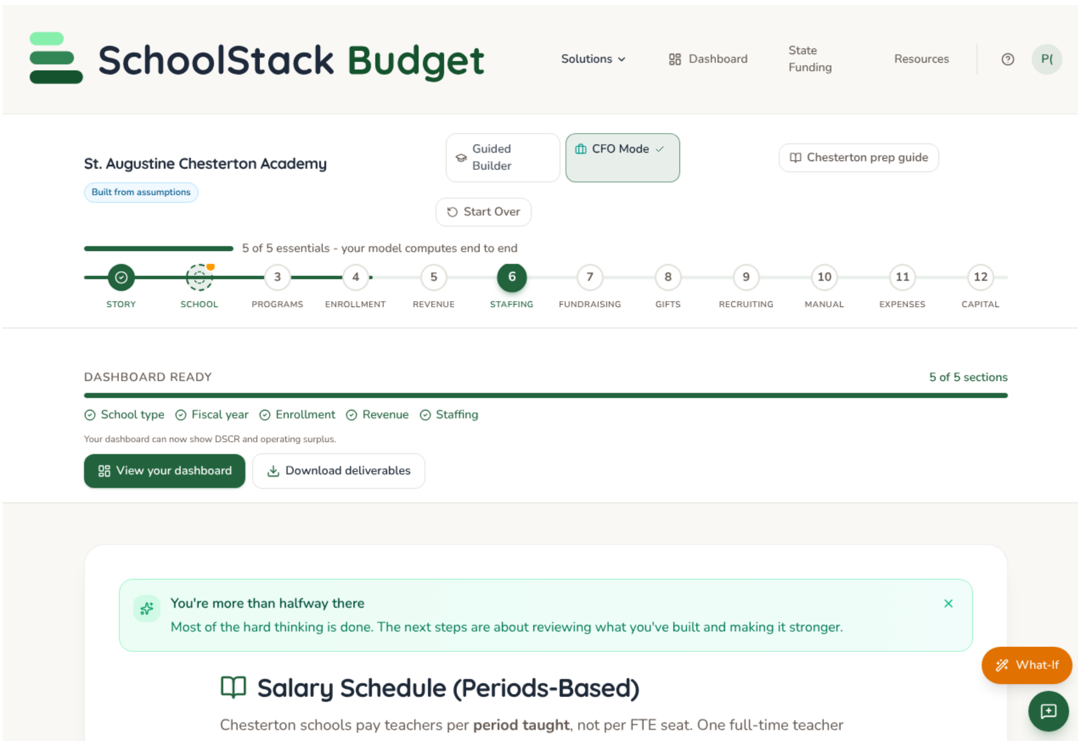
Pay yourself a real salary in the model even if you plan to defer it in Year 1. A model that only works because the founder works for free is not a viable model.

WIZARD STEP

Staffing, Salary Schedule (Periods-Based)

Chesterton Academy only, skip if your school type is anything else.

Replaces the standard Staffing step for Chesterton Academy launches. Chesterton schools pay teachers per *period taught*, not per FTE seat. One full-time teacher covers 5 periods/day; a part-time teacher who covers 3 periods earns 3/5 of the same base. You set a starting base + step increase here and list the subjects you'll offer.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ The CSN salary scale or a peer-school comparison
- ☐ Your draft subject list (Theology, Latin, Math, Great Books, etc.) with periods per section
- ☐ Health / retirement stipend quote, if you'll offer one

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Starting teacher salary (Bachelors, FT, Year 1), anchors the whole scale
- ☐ Annual step increase and any longevity steps
- ☐ Benefits stipend per FTE in Year 1
- ☐ Periods per section for each subject (drives total faculty cost)

Tip

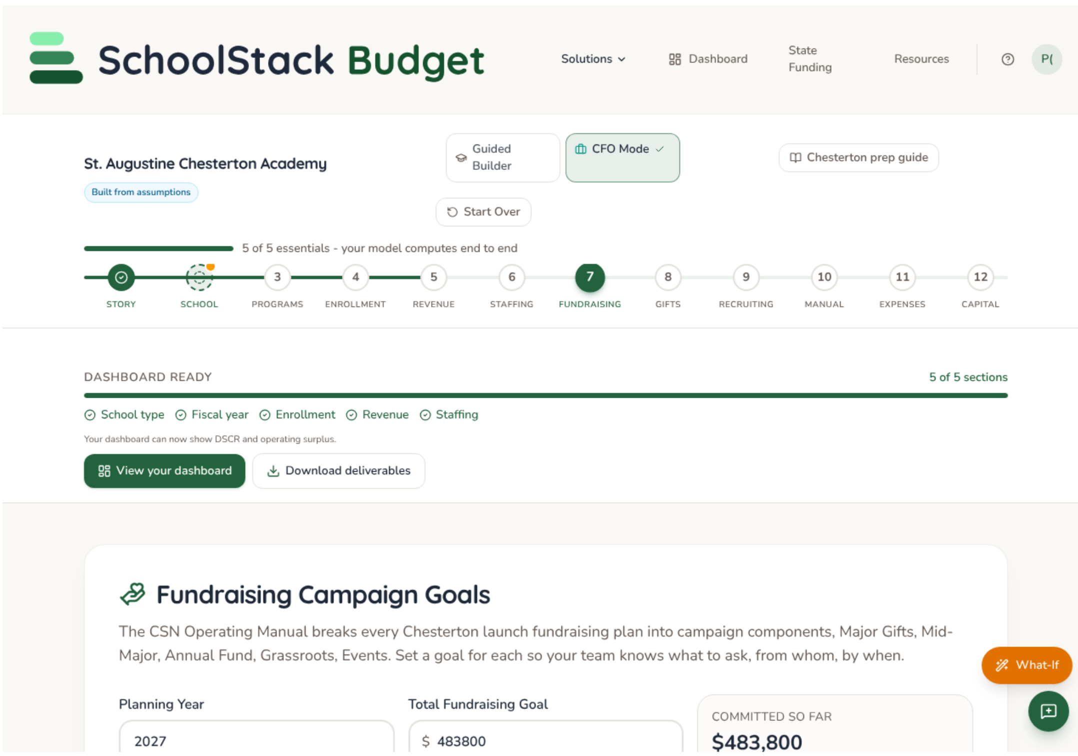
Most schools wildly under-budget faculty cost in Year 1 because they think "one teacher per subject." The periods-based view forces you to budget the actual classroom hours you'll need.

WIZARD STEP

Fundraising Goals, Fundraising Campaign Goals

Chesterton Academy only, skip if your school type is anything else.

The CSN Operating Manual breaks every Chesterton launch fundraising plan into campaign components (Major / Mid-Major / Annual Fund / Grassroots / Events). You set a goal for each so your team knows what to ask, and from whom, by when.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Last year's fundraising results, if any, broken out by campaign component
- ☐ Pledge agreements or letters of intent from named lead donors
- ☐ Your development calendar, when each appeal opens and closes

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Total fundraising goal for the planning year
- ☐ Goal for each campaign component (Major, Mid-Major, Annual Fund, Grassroots, Events)
- ☐ Which components you'll lead yourself vs. delegate to a development director / volunteer chair

Tip

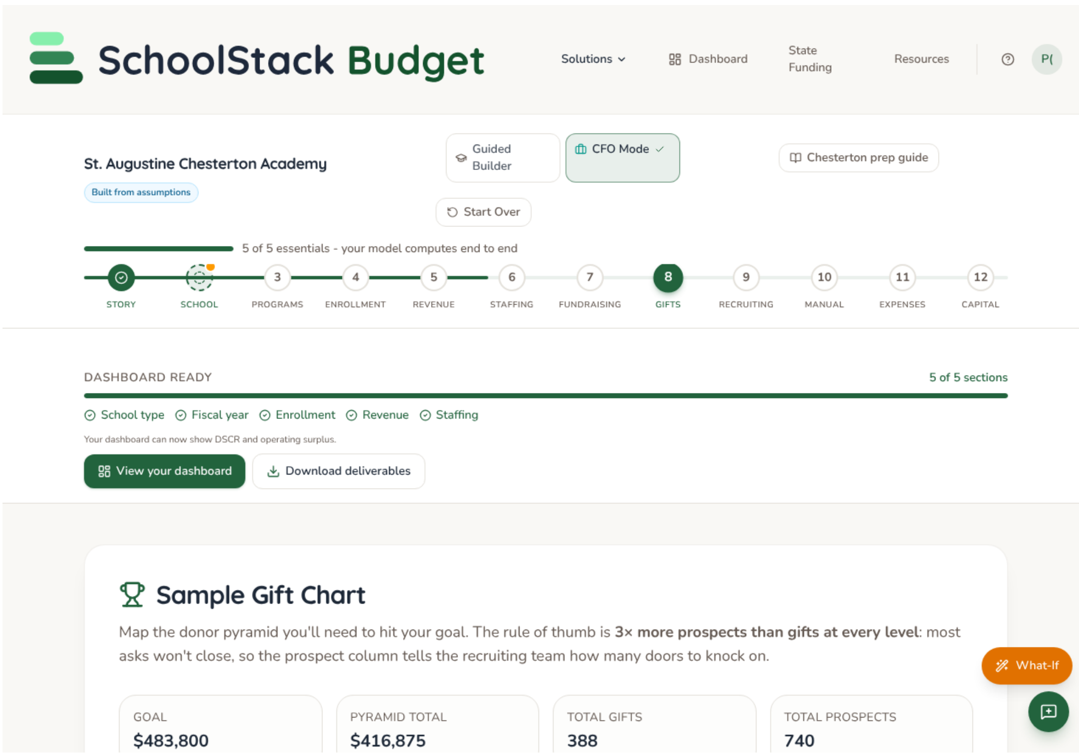
Splitting the goal into components turns one scary number into a list of concrete conversations, and lets the gift chart math on the next page work backwards from real prospect counts.

WIZARD STEP

Gift Chart, Sample Gift Chart

Chesterton Academy only, skip if your school type is anything else.

Map the donor pyramid you'll need to hit your goal. The rule of thumb is 3× more prospects than gifts at every level: most asks won't close, so the prospect column tells the recruiting team how many doors to knock on.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ A working list of named prospects at each gift level
- ☐ Notes on each prospect's relationship to the school / pastor / board

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Gift levels you'll target (e.g. $25k, $10k, $5k, $1k, <$1k)
- ☐ Number of gifts you need to close at each level
- ☐ Number of prospects to cultivate per level (typically 3× the gifts)

Tip

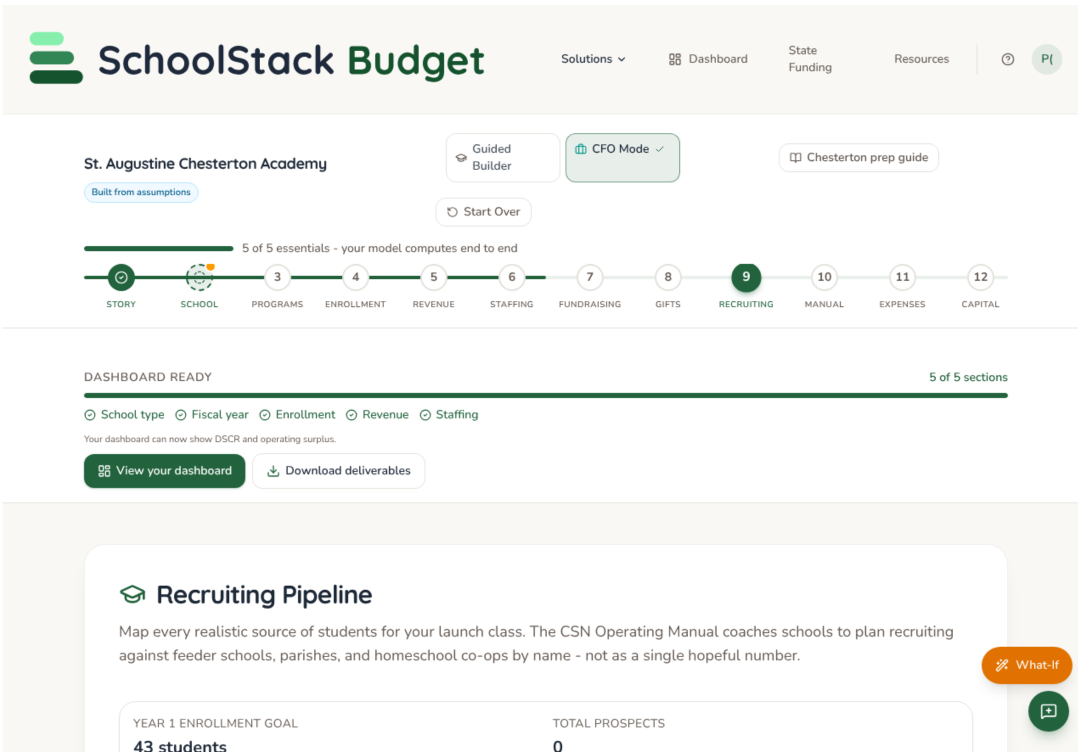
Lenders and board members trust schools that can answer "where do those five major gifts come from?", this step forces that answer.

WIZARD STEP

Recruiting, Student & Family Recruiting

Chesterton Academy only, skip if your school type is anything else.

Maps the family pipeline that will fill your freshman class: prospective students by feeder source, prospect-to-enrollment conversion rate, and the priests + facilities you're cultivating relationships with. The wizard also projects enrollment under best-case, expected, and stress-test conversion rates.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ A working list of feeder schools and parishes, with prospect counts at each
- ☐ Notes on which pastors / priests have endorsed (or might endorse) the school
- ☐ Notes on prospective facility partners (parishes, dioceses, donated buildings)

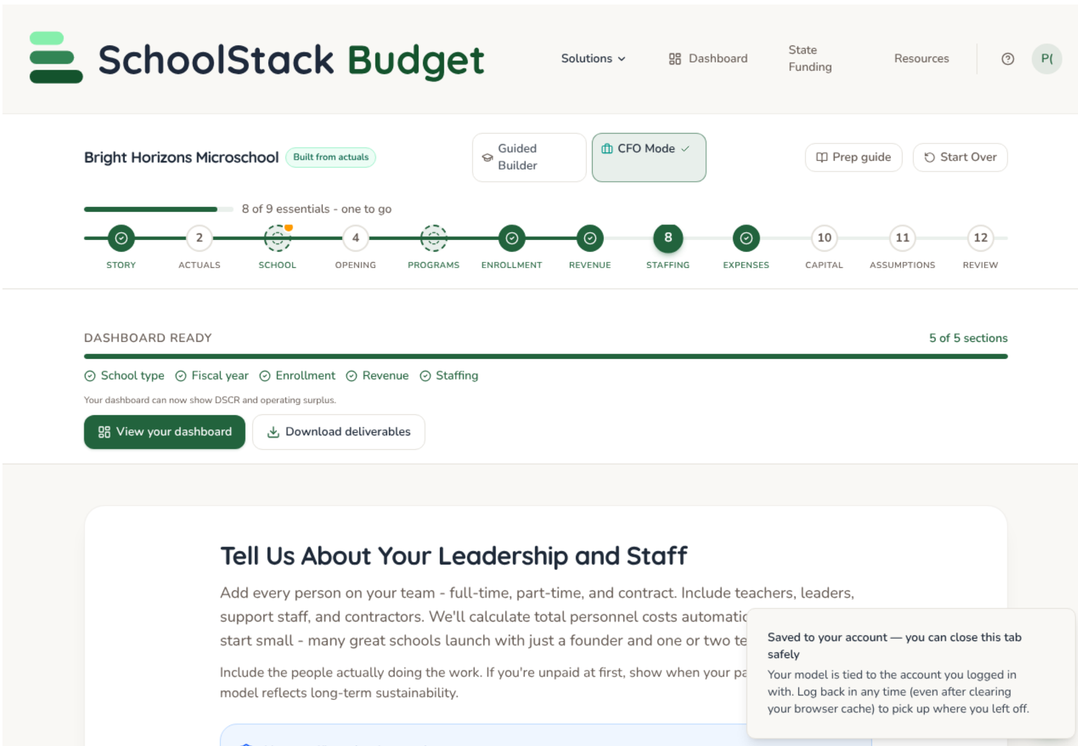
Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Prospect-to-enrollment conversion rate (CSN rule of thumb: 1-in-3)
- ☐ Total prospective students by feeder source for the freshman class
- ☐ Which facilities you're seriously pursuing (and a fallback plan)

WIZARD STEP

Expenses, Expenses & operations

Everything that isn't payroll: rent, utilities, curriculum, technology, insurance, marketing, professional services. The wizard groups these into facility, instruction, operations, and other so the categories match how lenders read a P&L.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Lease or LOI showing rent + NNN (taxes, insurance, maintenance)
- ☐ Utility estimates from your landlord or comparable buildings
- ☐ Curriculum quotes from your chosen publishers
- ☐ Insurance quote: general liability, property, D&O, workers' comp
- ☐ Marketing plan with proposed channels and spend

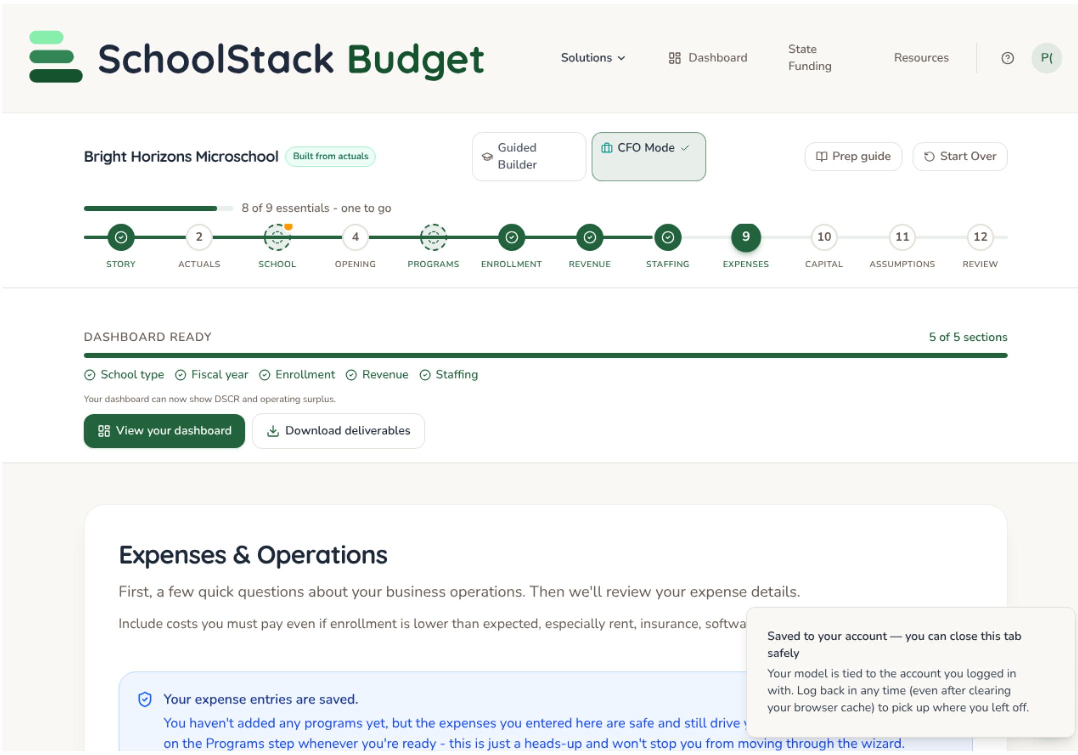
Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Monthly rent + NNN (or mortgage payment)
- ☐ Curriculum + instructional materials per student per year
- ☐ Technology cost per student (devices, software, internet)
- ☐ Marketing budget for the year
- ☐ Professional services: accounting, legal, audit, payroll provider
- ☐ Annual inflation assumption for non-salary costs (3% is typical)

WIZARD STEP

Capital & Financing, how you'll fund the launch

Loans, lines of credit, founder capital, deferred founder pay, restricted gifts. The wizard turns this into the debt-service and DSCR (Debt Service Coverage Ratio) numbers a lender will ask about first.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Loan term sheet or quote (amount, rate, term, amortization)
- ☐ Donor pledge agreements for any restricted capital gifts
- ☐ Personal financial statement, if you're guaranteeing the loan
- ☐ Build-out / leasehold improvement quotes from your contractor

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Total capital needed before opening day
- ☐ How much you're putting in personally vs. borrowing
- ☐ Loan amount, interest rate, term in years
- ☐ DSCR target your lender will require (1.20-1.30 is common)
- ☐ Whether you'll need a line of credit for working capital
- ☐ Any restricted gifts (carve-outs that can't fund operations)

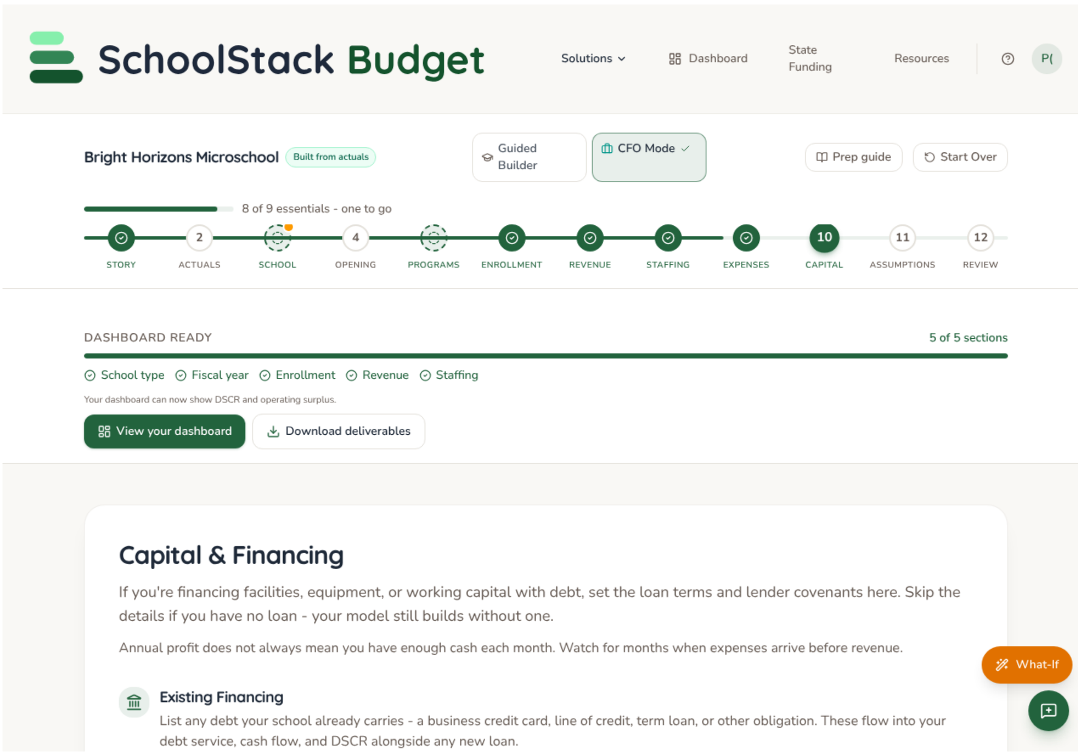
Tip

Restricted gifts can't legally cover operating costs or debt service. Keep them separate in your head before you enter them.

WIZARD STEP

Assumptions & Sensitivity, what could go wrong

Every key driver, enrollment, tuition, salaries, rent, has an assumption row where you flag your confidence and attach evidence. The wizard then runs sensitivity scenarios so you can see what happens if reality is 10-20% off.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Source documents for any number you'll mark as "high confidence" (a signed lease, a state per-pupil rate sheet, a payroll register)
- ☐ Notes on which numbers are still estimates vs. firm

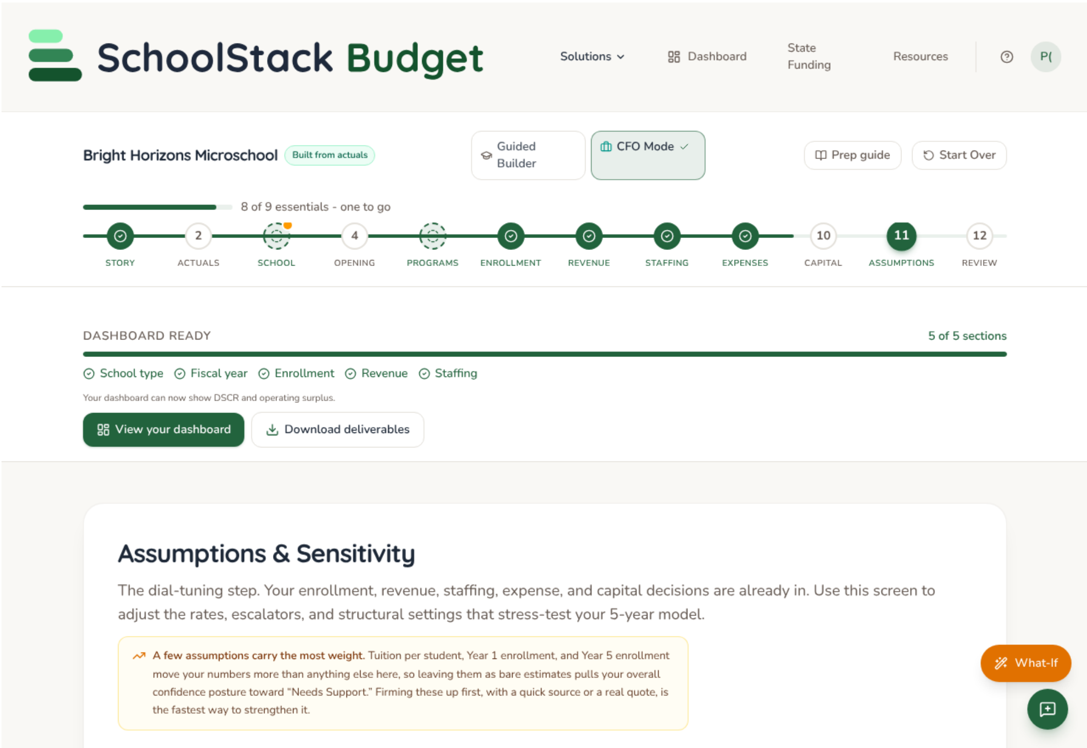
Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ For each major driver: high / medium / low confidence
- ☐ Which downside scenarios you want to stress-test ("enrollment 20% short", "lose a grant", "rent +15%")
- ☐ Your own DSCR / cash-runway thresholds for "acceptable risk"

WIZARD STEP

Review, Does everything look right?

A read-only summary of every input you've entered: revenue total, expense total, net income, Year-1 enrollment, key metrics, and a diagnostics panel with breakeven enrollment. This is your last chance to spot a typo or stale assumption before the analysis runs.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ A pen, or a co-founder on a screen-share, to sanity-check the totals

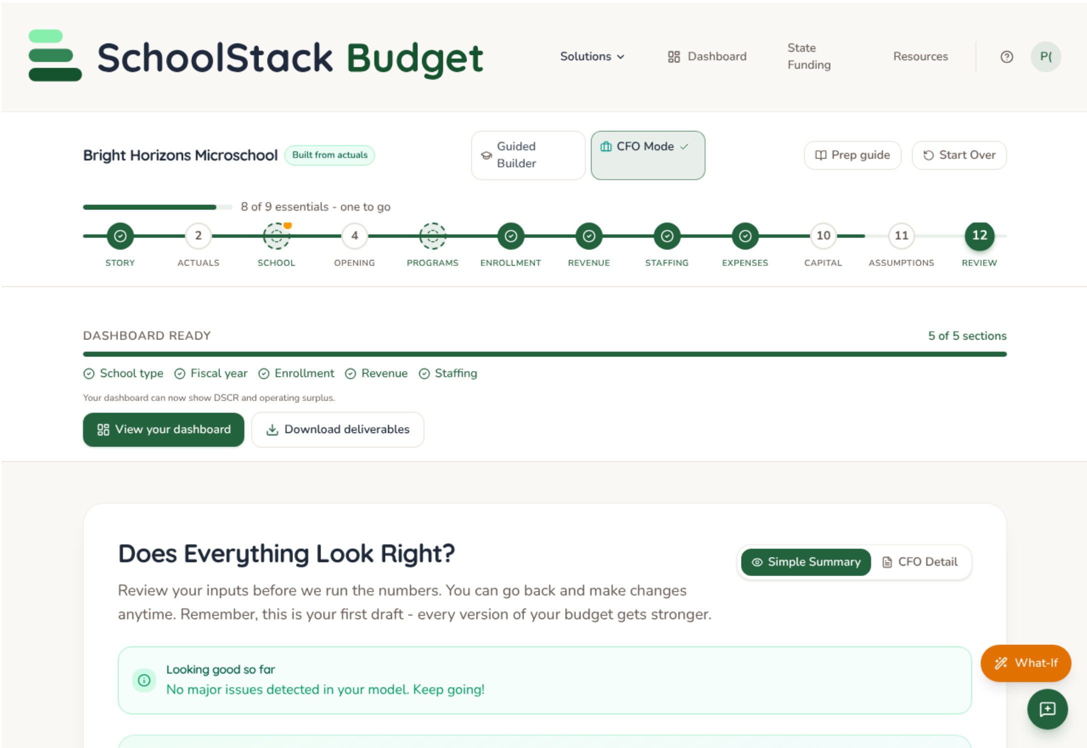
Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Whether any line item still needs revisiting (the wizard lets you jump back to any step)
- ☐ Whether the Year-1 net income / breakeven enrollment match your gut

WIZARD STEP

Consultant, Running your financial analysis

The wizard now runs the full consultant-style analysis on your inputs: financial-health scoring, lender-readiness checks, ratio analysis, and plain-English recommendations. This is the screen that mirrors what a paid CFO would tell you on a first read.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- [ ] Nothing new, this step reads the data you've already entered

Numbers & decisions to have ready

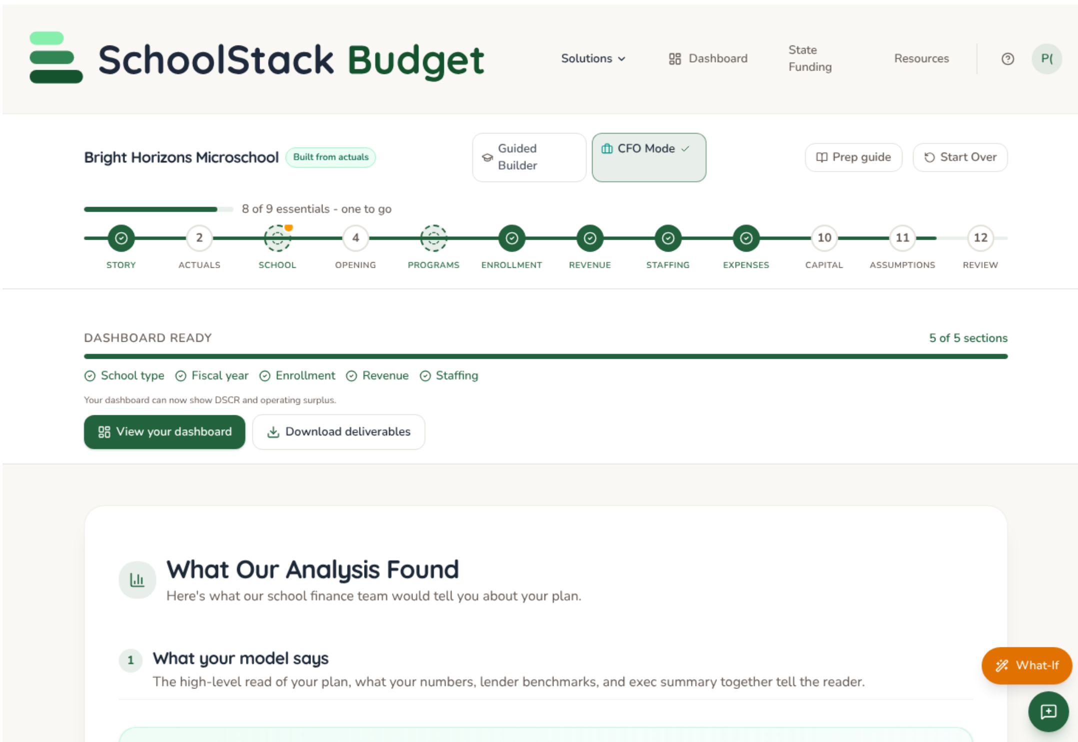
- [ ] Which recommendations you'll act on now vs. defer
- [ ] Whether to send the report to your board / lender as a first-pass diagnostic

WIZARD STEP

Lender Narrative, Plain-language explanation for a lender

Skipped for Single-Year models, the narrative is only generated for 5-year projections.

A drafted plain-language narrative explaining your model the way a lender expects to read one: market, model, ramp, capital structure, risks, mitigations. You can edit each section in place. This is what gets bundled into the Lender Conversation Snapshot PDF.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Notes on the specific lender's underwriting style, if you know it
- ☐ Any market or competitive data you want to weave into the narrative

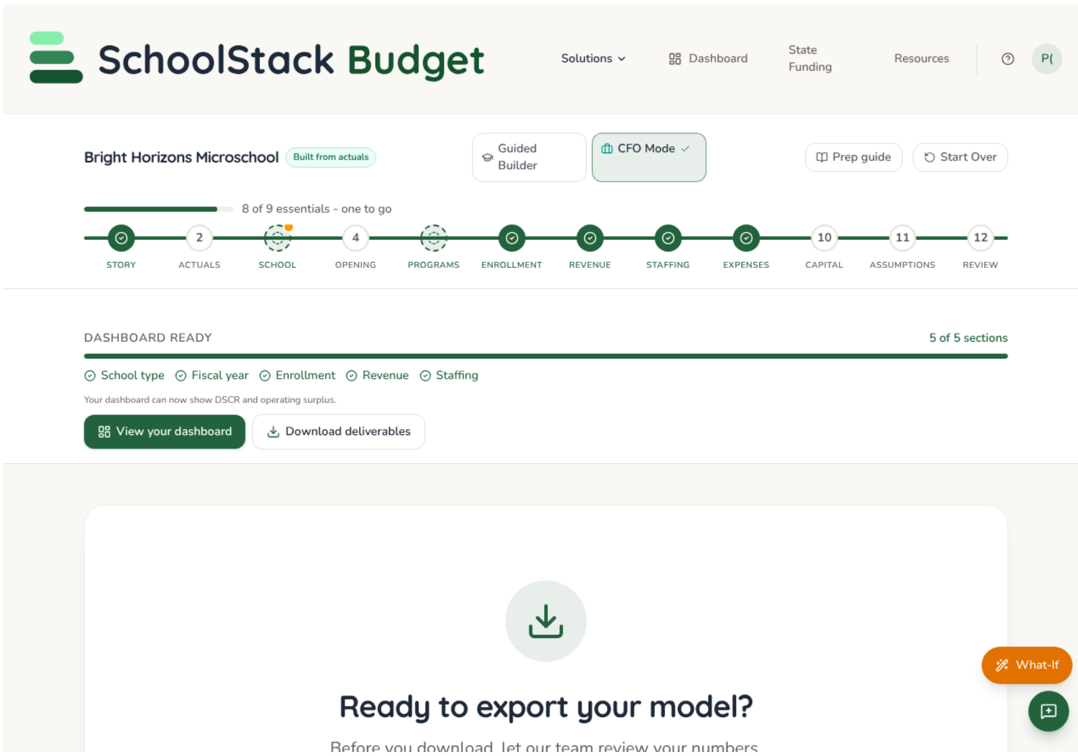
Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Which sections need your voice vs. the generated draft
- ☐ Whether to soften or sharpen the risk-and-mitigations language for your audience

WIZARD STEP

Export, Ready to export your model?

The final screen. You'll see the export options: Lender Conversation Snapshot PDF, Board & Funder Summary PDF, a 23-tab Founder Planning Workbook, and a 5-Year Financial Model with live Excel formulas. You can also request a free expert review and generate a shareable read-only link.



What this step looks like in the wizard.

Documents & records to gather

- ☐ Your contact info for any expert review you want to request
- ☐ A short list of the lenders / board members / funders you'll share the model with

Numbers & decisions to have ready

- ☐ Which exports you actually need (lender packet vs. board packet vs. workbook)
- ☐ Whether to request the free expert review from the SchoolStack team
- ☐ Whether to publish a read-only share link or keep the model private

> **Tip**
>
> Plan to come back to the wizard after every real-world change, a new lease, an actual enrollment count, a hire. Your budget is a living document.

Ready when you are.

You don't need every box on every page checked to start. The wizard will save your progress and let you come back as new information arrives - a signed lease, an actual enrollment count, a real payroll register. The first pass is the hardest; every pass after that is just refinement.

When you're ready, head to budget.schoolstack.ai and start a new model. Coaching tips appear right next to each input, so you're never guessing alone.

Free during beta. Your data stays yours. Built by The Building Hope Impact Fund.