



NACSA Awards for Excellence

Award Recipients (left-right): **Katie Piehl**, Director of Charter School Authorizing, Volunteers of America of Minnesota, on behalf of the State of Minnesota; **Mara Casey Tieken**, Co-author, *Inside Urban Charter Schools: Promising Practices and Strategies in Five High-Performing Schools*; **Carolyn Bridges**, Senior Director of Magnet, Choice and Charter Schools at Polk County Schools.

The NACSA Awards for Excellence program celebrates individuals and organizations that advance the authorizing profession in three fields:

- Advancing **Knowledge**,
- Improving **Policy**, and
- Improving **Practice**.

NACSA announced the 2009 recipients of its Awards for Excellence on October 21, 2009 at the 2009 NACSA Leadership Conference in Salt Lake City, Utah.

2009 Awards for Excellence Recipients

The Award for Excellence in Advancing Knowledge

Inside Urban Charter Schools: Promising Practices and Strategies in Five High-Performing Schools (Harvard Education Press, 2009)

Written by Katherine K. Merseth with Kristy Cooper, John Roberts, Mara Casey Tieken, Jon Valant, and Chris Wynne, *Inside Urban Charter Schools* offers an unprecedented look into the inner workings of successful urban charter schools by profiling five high-performing urban charter schools serving predominately low-income, minority youth in Massachusetts. Interviews, focus groups, data analysis, and careful classroom observations conducted over the course of two years flesh out rich and colorful portraits of daily life in these schools. The authors show that these schools excel along the organizational dimensions of structure, systems, human-resource strategies, culture, and clarity of mission.

The book is unique because it is an independent qualitative study that closely examines the culture, norms, and values of these highly successful institutions. The book is also unique because it offers a detailed examination of non Charter Management Organization (CMO) schools. This is important because the majority of charter schools are not members of CMO organizations, and therefore the lessons offered in this work are particularly relevant to a broad range of charter schools. The book has been featured at several national conferences and has received praise from industry experts.

The Award for Excellence in Improving Policy

The State of Minnesota

Minnesota is the birthplace of charter schools, having passed the nation's first charter school law in 1991. This law, however, did not contain a clear definition of the role of the authorizer or provide adequate funding to support quality authorizing. The newly approved changes to Minnesota's charter school law seek to improve the quality of the charter school sector chiefly through strengthening authorizing. The new law requires authorizers to meet rigorous standards of quality (based on NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*) to be eligible to grant charters. The amended law also significantly increases authorizer fees to schools (1.5% of basic revenue with minimum and maximum amounts per school) so that authorizers can have adequate resources to perform their duties. Finally, charter school law was also amended to allow up to three single-purpose authorizers whose sole purpose will be to charter schools. Multiple authorizer options foster fairness and offer an appeals option for renewals and revocations. These key changes to Minnesota's charter school law have significantly increased the authority, capacity, and accountability of Minnesota's charter school authorizers and will lead to a much stronger charter school sector.

This award is presented not only for what was done, but how it was done. Minnesota State Representative Linda Slocum and State Senator Kathy Saltzman were the legislation's chief authors and tireless champions. Special recognition goes to Katie Piehl, Director of Charter School Authorizing for [Volunteers of America of Minnesota](#), who played a key role in organizing Minnesota's diverse authorizing community.

The Award for Excellence in Improving Practice

Polk County Public Schools – Office of Magnet, Choice and Charter Schools

The [Polk County Public Schools – Office of Magnet, Choice and Charter Schools](#), oversees 26 charter schools, but their impact on Florida's authorizing environment has been much broader. In an effort to ensure continuous improvement in Polk County's chartering processes, the staff recognized the need to improve its renewal decision-making practices and documents. The challenges faced in developing a transparent and rigorous renewal process were echoed by many of the school districts in the Florida Association of Charter School Authorizers (FACSA). Since Carolyn Bridges, Senior Director of Magnet, Choice and Charter Schools at Polk County Schools, also serves as President of FACSA, she decided to expand Polk County 's project to benefit as many authorizers as possible. Consequently, Polk County wrote a Federal Voluntary Public School Choice (VPSC) grant which included nine central Florida coalition districts to work on this renewal document during the 08-09 school year. This VPSC project includes Polk, Osceola, Hillsborough, Indian River, Lake, Manatee, Orange, Pasco, and Sumter Counties.

The Florida Department of Education's Office of School Choice, recognizing the quality of work completed through this process, is using the renewal template as the state model. This renewal template is now before the Florida State Board of Education for final approval and implementation.

Past Recipients

2008

- Advancing Knowledge - [National Charter School Research Project](#)
- Improving Policy - [The State of Georgia](#)
- Improving Practice - [DC Public Charter School Board](#)

[2008 Awards Ceremony Photos](#)