

# NACSA CASE STUDY

## Endorsing NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*

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### THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* reflect recommended industry practices developed through years of experience working with entities of all types who are engaged in the daily work of charter school authorizing. These guidelines have been written into numerous state laws, informed federal legislation, and served as the basis for the evaluation of authorizer practices. When embraced by authorizers and policymakers, they help to create an environment in which authorizers can better do their jobs to foster and grow great charter schools.

### NACSA RECOMMENDS

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) recommends that states:

- Endorse the *Principles & Standards* to provide clear guidance and support to authorizers on professional practices.
- Use the *Principles & Standards* to help authorizers effectively address poorly performing schools.
- Rely on the *Principles & Standards* to guide authorizer evaluation and sanctions, to ensure that authorizers themselves are held accountable for the performance of the schools they charter.
- Incorporate the *Principles & Standards* directly into charter legislation to promote high standards and professional practice from the outset.

This brief highlights legislation from Minnesota, Colorado, and Washington, among other states. Please see "[NACSA Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing](#)" for more information on NACSA's policy recommendations and detailed policy language.

## The Case for Endorsing NACSA's *Principles & Standards*

### Overview — *Principles & Standards* Promote Autonomy and Ensure Accountability

As the charter school community has grown and matured across the United States, policymakers, authorizers, and charter school leaders have often struggled with how to protect charter school autonomy, while at the same time holding schools accountable for results. High-quality authorizing is essential to addressing this challenge.

NACSA's *Principles & Standards*, developed and refined over the course of many years, offer policymakers, authorizers, charter school leaders, and other educators a common starting place,



“My advice to policymakers in other states? Don’t reinvent the wheel. Use NACSA’s *Principles & Standards*.”

—Cindy Murphy,  
Charter Center Director,  
Minnesota Department  
of Education

clear guidance, and shared standards for quality authorizing. They help to de-politicize charter school decision-making, improving practice of authorizers and charter schools alike.

In this brief, we describe how various states have endorsed NACSA's *Principles & Standards* and how the principles and standards help to promote autonomy and ensure accountability.

## *Principles & Standards* Help Policymakers and Charter Leaders Address Existing

### FOCUS OF PRINCIPLES & STANDARDS

NACSA's *Principles & Standards* are based on **three core principles** of high-quality charter authorizing:

1. Maintain high standards for schools
2. Uphold school autonomy
3. Protect student and public interests

In addition to these principles, *Principles & Standards* address **five key standards** for high-quality authorizing:

1. Agency commitment and capacity
2. Comprehensive, fair, rigorous, and transparent application process and decision-making
3. Performance contracting
4. Ongoing oversight and evaluation
5. Revocation and renewal decision-making

## Challenges and Anticipate New Challenges

Increasingly policymakers are including NACSA's *Principles & Standards* in state-level policy, revising and improving policy in long-standing charter states and creating comprehensive policy in newly-initiated charter states.

### Addressing Challenges—How Existing Charter States Can Use the *Principles & Standards* to Ensure Accountability and Promote Autonomy

**Use *Principles & Standards* to Eliminate Bad Actors** – In a number of long-standing charter states, the charter community has come under fire for failing to scrutinize or close low-quality schools. Policies that endorse NACSA's *Principles & Standards*—combined with evaluations and sanctions for poorly-performing authorizers—ensure that schools must meet agreed-upon standards to receive a charter; that their results will be reviewed regularly; that performance will be managed according to high-quality, mutually agreed-upon performance contracts; and that sanctions will be in place, allowing authorizers to close schools that are not meeting quality standards. Both schools and authorizers are held publicly accountable for results, and bad actors (both weak authorizers and failing schools) become less prevalent or less problematic.

As the oldest charter state in the nation, Minnesota has often been a leader in charter school innovation and reform. In 2009, Minnesota enacted comprehensive legislation to ensure that charter authorizers are reviewed, evaluated, and held publicly accountable. The legislation requires that all

“If we believe that good authorizing matters, we have to be able to define it and measure it.”

—Jim Griffin, President,  
Colorado League of  
Charter Schools

authorizers (both existing and prospective) apply to and be approved by the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). Authorizers must also submit to review by MDE every five years, and MDE has the authority to shut down authorizers that do not meet requirements.

Since the law was implemented in 2009, the number of authorizers in Minnesota has declined from a high of almost 60 before the law was passed to 27 currently. Authorizers were granted additional resources to do their jobs more effectively—they can now charge higher administrative fees—and in turn they, and their schools, are held to a much higher accountability standard. NACSA's *Principles & Standards* helped shape the legislation as well as the administration of the law.

**Employ Principles & Standards to Provide Guidance and Support to Authorizers, Especially Reluctant Authorizers** – In states where authorizers—such as state departments of education or school districts—have been designated by the state, they may lack resources (time, staff support, funding), and frankly interest, in authorizing. By endorsing *Principles & Standards*, state policy-makers provide clear guidance and standards for professional practice for authorizers, school leaders, and legislators.

In Colorado, for example, policymakers recently enacted legislation encouraging local authorizers, almost all of which are school districts, to follow “nationally recognized principles and standards for quality authorizing.” The legislation emerged from a series of recommendations by a state-level committee—the 1412 Committee—charged with reviewing standards for charter schools and charter school authorizers.

Subsequently, a group led by the Colorado League of Charter Schools and the Colorado School Boards Association (CASB) received funds from NACSA to help support a coalition of willing districts as they implement principles and standards. Though this support (and the policy endorsement of standards) is not a panacea, it has helped provide a common yardstick for quality. As Michelle Murphy, Director of Member Legal Resources at CASB notes, “Having principles and standards brings integrity to decisions around applications, closure, etc. They can serve as a protective element for authorizers and schools.”

### **Ensure Best Practice from the Outset — How States are Incorporating NACSA's *Principles & Standards* into New Charter Legislation**

**Adopt Principles & Standards as Part of New Comprehensive Charter Legislation**—In Washington, for example, which recently passed Initiative 1240, charter advocates focused on building best practice into the legislation as much as possible.

Advocates who helped craft the legislation worked from lessons learned in other states and drew on the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' Model Law. They also built NACSA's *Principles & Standards* directly into the Initiative.

Initiative 1240 requires adherence to the *Principles & Standards* on all levels, including evaluations and sanctions of authorizers.

“We had an opportunity to do it right, and that’s what we did. We consulted with national experts and aimed to make the best policy we could. We knew that strong authorizing and accountability gets you better schools, and that’s what we were aiming for. Incorporating NACSA’s *Principles & Standards* was not a difficult call.”

—Lisa MacPharlane, one of the leaders of the movement to pass Initiative 1240, Washington’s new charter law

### The Impact—Everyone Benefits

By endorsing NACSA’s *Principles & Standards* in legislation, **policymakers can set standards and guide professional practice.** The *Principles & Standards* serve as a jumping off point, allowing the state to lead expectations. Once the expectations are there, authorizers, and other charter leaders can further deepen and refine practice. Moreover, the acts of authorizing and oversight are de-politicized, protecting authorizers, schools, and ultimately, students and their families.

“In New Mexico recently, there was a serious effort to put a moratorium in place to limit or cut funding for charters. New Mexico’s response was to align charter practice to the model law, to strengthen accountability, overhaul authorizing regulations, and increase oversight. This has led to a sense of renewal in the charter sector in New Mexico.”

—Todd Ziebarth, Senior Vice President, State Advocacy and Support, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

Additionally, **the expectations of the *Principles & Standards* are broad enough that they can apply to all authorizers—large and small, old and new.** For new or less-experienced authorizers, the *Principles & Standards* offer an essential road map to guide planning and organizational development of strong practices, including the identification of areas where deeper guidance or additional assistance is needed. For experienced authorizers, the *Principles & Standards* serve as a resource for identifying areas for improvement or refinement to achieve ever-stronger outcomes, as demonstrated by the quality of the schools they oversee.

**Charter school leaders know what to expect**—from applications to performance contracting—and have recourse if authorizers are not doing their jobs effectively.

**Students, parents, and the public benefit from high-quality, transparent and effective practices.** Both schools and authorizers are held accountable for results.

In short, everyone benefits.

### JOIN US IN SUPPORTING THE *ONE MILLION LIVES* CAMPAIGN



This is one in a series of policy briefs, part of a multi-pronged campaign designed to provide one million more children the chance to attend a great school that will prepare them for success throughout their lives.

By engaging authorizers, policymakers and a broad nationwide coalition to close failing charter schools and open many more good ones, the *One Million Lives* campaign is working to get one million more children into 3,000 high-performing schools over the next five years.

To learn more, visit [www.qualitycharters.org/one-million-lives](http://www.qualitycharters.org/one-million-lives).