



A LOOK AT THOMAS B. FORDHAM FOUNDATION

Case Study Analysis for the Quality Practice Project

The authors would like to thank the authorizing board members and staff, charter school operators, advocacy organizations, and other local actors who provided valuable data, feedback, and insight for this case study. We are also grateful to staff from Public Impact who were thought partners from the beginning of this project, led the data collection and analysis efforts on academic performance, participated in advisory panel meetings, participated in multi-day site visits with NACSA staff, and assisted in making sense of the findings. All content, errors, omissions, and conclusions are solely those of the report's authors.

We encourage the free use, reproduction, and distribution of our materials, but **we require attribution for all use.**

Please cite this report as:

Rausch, M. K., Conlan, S., Brooks-Uy, V. & Smith, N. (2018). *A Look at Thomas B. Fordham Foundation: Case Study Analysis for the Quality Practice Project*. Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Retrieved from <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research/quality-practice-project/>

ABOUT NACSA

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is working to double the number of students in great public charter schools by advancing policies and practices that promote quality, autonomy, and choice. As an independent voice for quality charter school authorizing, NACSA uses data and evidence to encourage smart charter school growth. NACSA works with authorizers and partners to create the gold standard for authorizing and build authorizers' capacity to make informed decisions. NACSA also provides research and information that help policymakers and advocates move past the rhetoric to make evidence-based policy decisions. More at www.qualitycharters.org.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| About This Case Study | 4 |
| About The Authorizer | 6 |
| Organizational Capacity | 9 |
| Organizational Structure | 9 |
| Planning and Priority Setting | 10 |
| Human Capital Identification and Development | 11 |
| Relationships with Entites Outside of the Authorizing Office | 12 |
| Organizational Culture | 13 |
| Basic Values | 13 |
| How Values and Intentions are Communicated | 13 |
| View of Charters and Relationship to Schools | 13 |
| External vs. Internal Focus | 14 |
| Role of Leadership | 14 |
| Role of Charter Office in Context | 14 |
| Growth Mindset | 14 |
| Entrepreneurial vs. Compliance-driven Attitude | 15 |
| Process vs. Professional Judgment | 15 |
| Application Systems And Processes | 16 |
| Priorities for New Charter School Authorization/Application Philosophy | 16 |
| Application Process | 17 |
| Access and Equity Issues in the Application Process | 21 |
| Performance Management | 22 |
| Pre-Opening Systems and Practices | 22 |
| Performance Framework | 22 |
| Performance Accountability | 23 |
| Extension, Renewal, and Revocation | 24 |
| Replication and Growth | 24 |

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

The Quality Practice Project (QPP), an initiative of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), is designed to build a stronger evidence base linking authorizing practices and student outcomes. The purpose of the QPP is to test, broaden, and deepen our knowledge of how and why authorizers do their work and, above all, what authorizing perspectives and practices correlate with strong student and public interest outcomes. By studying the practices of authorizers with a range of performance profiles— with a focus on authorizers with very strong student and public interest outcomes— NACSA hopes to dramatically accelerate the adoption of practices that lead to stronger outcomes for students and communities.

Outcome-Based Selection

This case study is one of five analyses of authorizers with strong student and public interest outcomes. It represents a description of authorizing perspectives and practices across a number of key domains. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Fordham) authorizing office was chosen to participate in the QPP and is the focus of this case study. It met a range of rigorous student and public interest outcomes. A complete description of the authorizer selection process, assessment methodology—including the measures and metrics used to assess performance—and case study process can be found [here](#).

In general, authorizers meeting those outcomes have:

- More academically high-performing schools (and associated students) than average- performing schools
- A small proportion of low-performing schools (and students in low-performing schools)
- Schools that are financially viable
- Student enrollment of key socio-demographic groups in the charter school portfolio that is similar or higher than a similarly situated group of schools
- No widespread instances of unethical behavior among schools in their portfolio
- Publicly-available data on the academic, financial, and operational performance of individual schools
- No instances of first-year closures

- Closed schools with egregious academic, operational, financial, or unlawful practices
- Closed schools in the bottom 5 percent of academic performance
- Schools with high academic performance that have expanded their enrollment or have replicated to serve more students

Case Study Generation Process

After the assessment of student and public interest outcomes and authorizer selection, a deep investigation of authorizer perspectives and practices ensued. Following the case study process as outlined by Yin (2015), researchers from NACSA and Public Impact engaged in a range of activities designed to provide a comprehensive description of the approach to authorizing, including:

- **Case Study Protocol:** Building from the domains used by NACSA to evaluate the practices of authorizers as well as the advice of an expert advisory group, researchers created a case study protocol and specific domains of inquiry. Key questions and domains of inquiry can be found [here](#).
- **Document and Artifact Review:** Researchers reviewed a range of documents and artifacts (see [here](#) for documents analyzed). This data was used both to describe authorizing practices and to more clearly focus individual interviews.
- **Interviews and Site Visits:** Researchers spent two days at each QPP site interviewing authorizers and other key stakeholders. The purpose of the site visits was to (a) get clarification on authorizing practices after examining documents and artifacts and (b) more clearly understand how and why authorizers engage in specific practices. Individual and small group interviews were conducted at each site. The majority of interviews were with authorizers (e.g., day-to-day decision makers, board members), but researchers also interviewed other key stakeholders (e.g., school operators, charter support organizations) to deepen and triangulate data analysis. The site visit for Fordham was July 27-28, 2016.

- **Member Check:** Draft case studies were shared with authorizers and other key stakeholders at each site. Changes were made to the case study based on feedback received from stakeholders.

Purpose and Use of this Case Study

This is a case study of practices and perspectives of one authorizer that has a portfolio of schools achieving strong results, and caution should be used in making strong claims—good or bad—from it exclusively. Drawing causal inferences between authorizer practices and outcomes based solely on this case study are inappropriate; a high-performing sector of charter schools is inclusive of, not exclusively determined by, authorizer perspectives and practices. In addition, this case study is intentionally descriptive, not evaluative. It is not designed to evaluate authorizer practices against any standard of performance, and the case study does not comment on the degree to which an authorizer’s practices are “good” or “bad.” While this case study may be instructive to the field on its own, it is best used in conjunction with other case studies of authorizers with strong practices. We strongly encourage readers to also view NACSA’s summary of similarities and differences across QPP authorizers, found [here](#).

Descriptions of practices are current as of the development of this case study, typically 3-6 months after the site visit. Changes in authorizing philosophy, staff, and practices made after that time are not reflected in this case study.

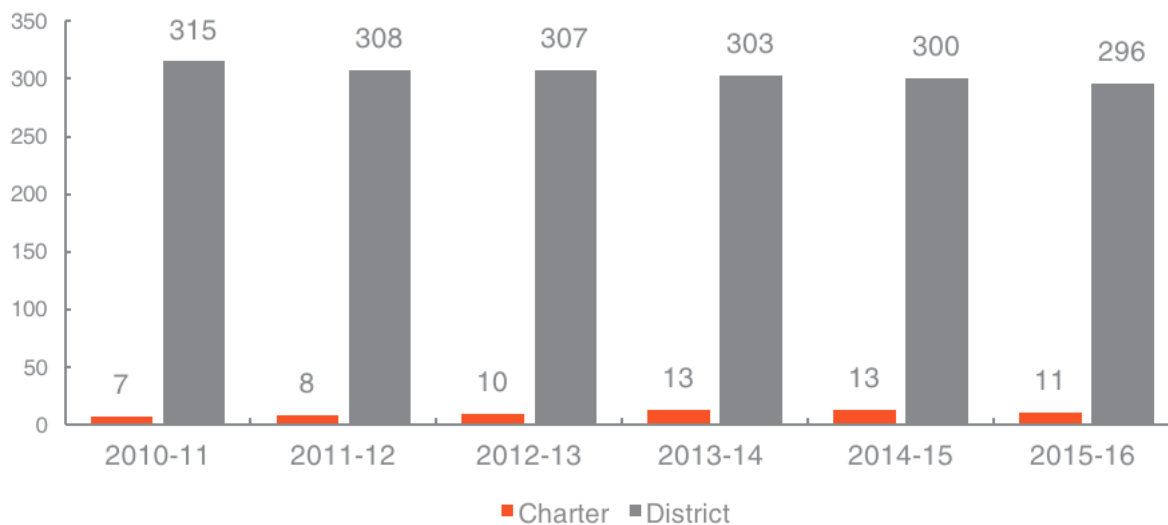
ABOUT THE AUTHORIZER

Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

| OHIO AUTHORIZERS | SCHOOLS (2015-16) |
|--|-------------------|
| Educational Service Center of Lake Erie West | 58 |
| Buckeye Community Hope Foundation | 49 |
| Ohio Council of Community Schools | 48 |
| St. Aloysius Orphanage | 42 |
| Educational Resource Consultants of Ohio, Inc. | 20 |
| North Central Ohio Educational Service Center | 14 |
| Thomas B. Fordham Foundation | 11 |
| Cleveland Municipal School District | 10 |
| Richland Academy | 10 |

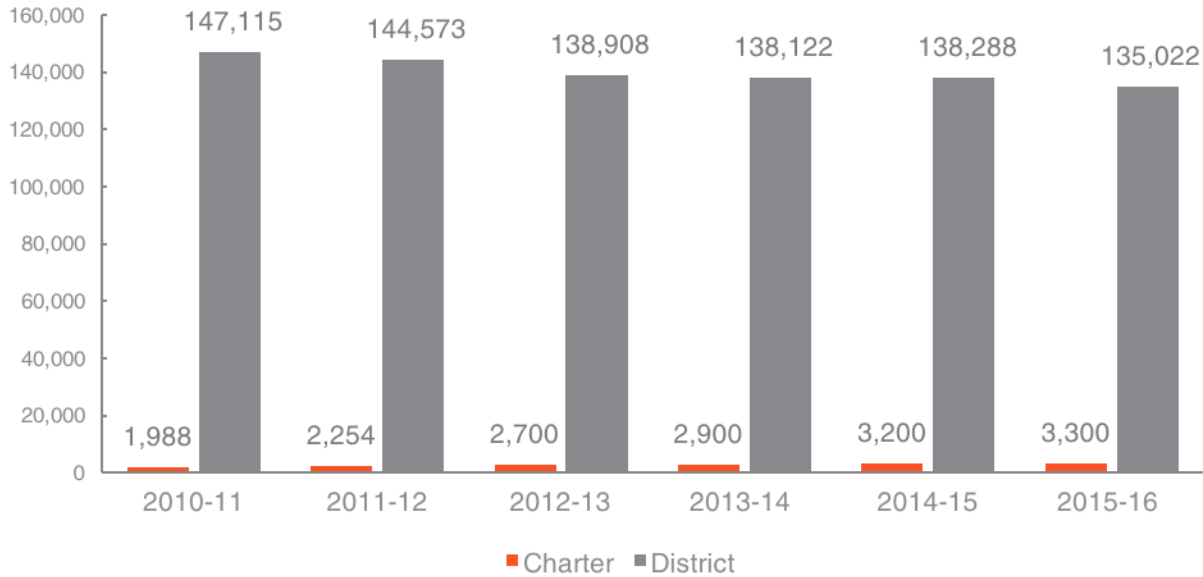
Note: List contains Ohio authorizers with 10 or more schools. List sorted by number of schools.

FORDHAM CHARTER AND DISTRICT SCHOOLS



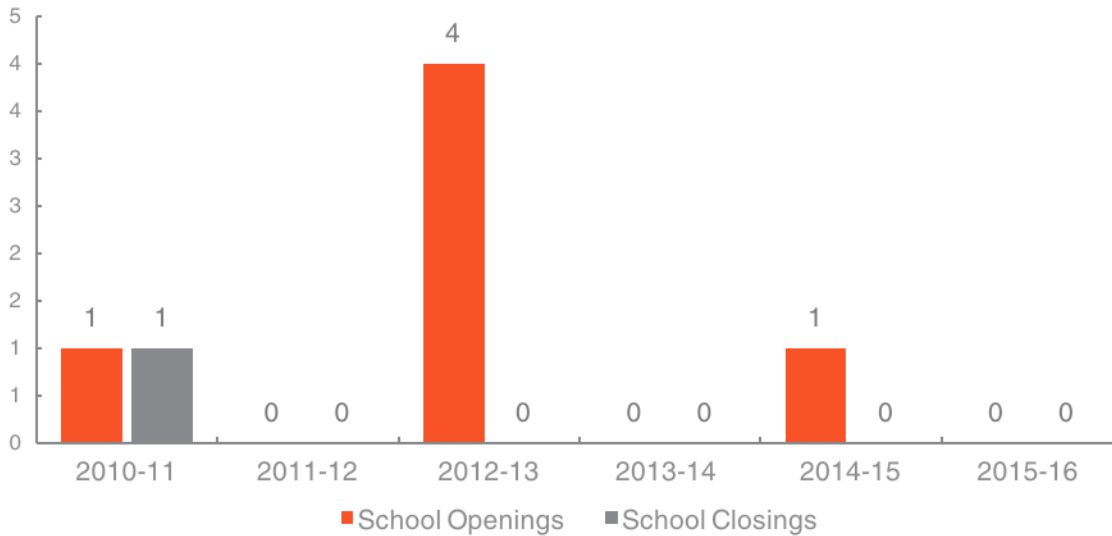
Note: The number of district schools includes the count of district-run schools in the five districts where Fordham-authorized schools are present.

FORDHAM CHARTER AND DISTRICT ENROLLMENT



Note: The number of students in district-run schools includes the count of students in district-run schools in the five districts where Fordham-authorized schools are present.

FORDHAM OPENINGS AND CLOSINGS



Key Facts on Authorizing and Policy Context

- Ohio charter legislation first passed in 1996.
- The state has 64 different authorizers, including school district authorizers, the state Department of Education, Not-For-Profit authorizers, and Higher Education Institution authorizers. District authorizers include both traditional school districts and regional bodies that can encompass multiple districts. Most authorizers are school district authorizers with small portfolios.
- New-start charter schools in Ohio may be located only in state-designated “challenged” school districts.

- Ohio statute includes an authorizer application, evaluation, and sanction process.
- State law requires the adoption of NACSA standards.
- State law requires a charter contract and, as of 2015, requires charter contracts to include performance standards that relate to the academic, fiscal, and operational performance of the charter school.
- Authorizers can choose to non-renew or terminate a charter contract if the school fails to meet the student performance requirements stated in the charter contract. State law also allows “reasonable progress” to be sufficient for a charter to be renewed.
- State law requires default closure of schools declared to be in academic crisis, with differing standards for different grade configurations.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Organizational Structure

Context. The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Fordham) is a 501(c)(3) organization.¹ Fordham’s contemporary work in education reform dates back to 1997 when the organization relaunched itself with a primary focus on educational reform, thought leadership, grant making, and other efforts designed to transform educational systems. The organization’s work is grounded, as described on their website, in the belief that too many American children—both those in high-needs environments and affluent areas—are not being adequately prepared for college, career, or knowledgeable participation in our democracy, despite our country spending more per pupil than almost every other country. Fordham has a nine-member Board of Trustees (with six Trustees Emeritus) residing all across the country that are the final decision makers for the organization, including high-stakes authorizing decisions.

The charter school authorizing infrastructure², based in Dayton, Ohio, is one of five organizational units of Fordham. Three of those units are based in Washington, DC (national research, external relations, and finance/operations), and the other (Ohio policy and advocacy) is based in Columbus, Ohio.

Fordham became an authorizer in 2005 after a number of years with little success in trying to entice other entities in the state to become high-quality authorizers. Stakeholders indicated the decision to become an authorizer was complicated and carried significant risk due primarily to the nationally known thought leadership work of Fordham (i.e., the education reform thought leadership work could lose significant credibility if Fordham’s charter school portfolio was not strong). Most of the 11 schools currently authorized by Fordham are in the Dayton and Columbus areas, although they do have some schools in other parts of the state, including two in a primarily rural community.

Staffing. Fordham’s authorizing unit has four staff members including (a) the Vice President for Sponsorship and Dayton Initiatives, who is responsible for oversight of and decision making for the authorizing unit, as well as

for cultivating new schools, growth of existing schools, and strategic thinking; (b) the Director for Applications and Contracts, who is responsible for all application process and decision making, contracting, school board relationships (shared with other staff members), and new school start-up systems; (c) the Finance Manager, who is responsible for school financial oversight, facilities, funding, and school board relationships (shared with other staff members); and (d) the Data Analyst, who is responsible for compliance-related activities, site visits, and office management.

The Vice President for Sponsorship and Dayton Initiatives reports to Fordham’s President (who is also a member of the Board of Trustees). According to stakeholders, the Vice President and authorizing staff are charged with making most authorizing decisions that come before the Board of Trustees. The President is involved with decision-making as needed for authorizing work and serves as more of a “thought partner” but does not micro-manage nor make authorizing decisions independent of staff. The other three authorizing unit staff members report to the Vice President for Sponsorship.

Fordham has people on staff and on the Board that have overseen the development of the organization’s authorizing work since its inception. Two of the four authorizing staff members—the Vice President for Sponsorship and the Director of Applications and Contracts—have been with the authorizing unit since its inception in 2005. In addition, one of the Trustees (and still among the Board’s most active members) was Fordham’s President from 1997 to 2014, leading the Board and staff in making the decision to become an authorizer and overseeing its development until 2014.

Stakeholders noted they do not anticipate growing the number of staff members anytime soon, due in part to their desire to remain small. Staff related that they really like having a relatively small authorizing staff, as they believe that structure enables a culture of “healthy respect,” the “ability to challenge each other’s thinking,”

¹ While there are some important functional differences between the Fordham Institute and Fordham Foundation, most of the authorizing work is done by the Foundation.

² While charter school authorizers in Ohio are referred to as sponsors in state law (and by many authorizers themselves), we refer to them as authorizers for consistency with other reports in this series.

and a “culture of spirited conversations where the quality of the relationship isn’t at risk,” as noted by staff members. They did indicate that in the future they see value in adding one additional team member with expertise in special education oversight.

Planning and Priority Setting

Until October of 2016, Fordham’s authorizing work did not have an independent mission but situated its work within the larger organizational mission that read in part:

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is the nation’s leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in Ohio. We advance (a) high standards for schools, students, and educators; (b) quality educational options for families, (c) a more productive, equitable, and efficient education system; and (d) a culture of innovation, entrepreneurship, and excellence.³

Fordham’s authorizing practice work operates from an annually updated strategic plan. Many (but not all) of the authorizing goals, priorities, and plans are described in the Dayton Strategic Plan document (2014). It includes a detailed description of the educational and economic challenges facing the Dayton area in order to provide a compelling description for the need of Fordham’s work in that area. It also describes a long-term vision for Fordham’s work in the region, including two five-year focus areas: (1) growing the number of high-quality seats in high-poverty charter schools, and (2) offering Common Core English/language arts curriculum audits to high-poverty schools (district-run, charter, and private).

Strategies and goals are clear and measurable. Two primary strategies associated with the first goal around growing the number of high-quality charter school seats (which is where the authorizing unit spends nearly all of its time) include (a) recruiting new schools to open in the Dayton area and (b) growing local talent. The most recent goals associated with those strategies include:

- Continuing to model effective authorizing practices while expanding its charter portfolio to 3,800 students
- Focusing on increasing the number of high-quality seats and schools by supporting Dayton Early College Academy (DECA)’s growth

Each of these two goals has measurable outputs and outcomes, including portfolio outcomes (e.g., 80 percent of schools will be recognized as being in the top quartile of Ohio charters); authorizer activities (e.g., conducting 35 well-executed site visits); recruitment and expansion targets (e.g., recruit three more promising schools or expansions to Fordham’s portfolio); expansion of existing quality schools; and specific goals and activities around supporting the expansion of DECA, including identifying grant funding to help that network open a second elementary school.

Unit-based goals, measures, and metrics are established annually. Typically, during its February Board meeting, members of the Board of Trustees approve broad organizational goals and strategic direction areas of emphasis. Each unit then creates its own goals and measures aligned with the Board-approved goals and areas of emphasis. The Board then reviews and approves those unit-based goals and measures. Stakeholders indicated that with the exception of when the Board is engaged in a new strategic plan creation (which happens infrequently, approximately every five years), this process is primarily updating the prior year’s goals and measures.

Of note, stakeholders indicated that while they would like to set higher growth goals for the portfolio of schools and students served by quality charter schools, their desire for growth is tempered by the challenges faced in the Ohio charter school sector. Stakeholders identified specific challenges to charter growth in Ohio, including Ohio’s “bad national reputation” for low-quality charters, difficulty in recruiting human capital to start new high-quality schools in Ohio and especially the Dayton area, very low per-pupil funding for charters statewide, and challenges associated with facility acquisition and funding.

³In October 2016, Fordham updated its mission, which now reads: “The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (and its affiliated Foundation) promote educational excellence for every child in America via quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as advocacy and charter school authorizing in Ohio.”

Approximately 90-95 percent of the budget for authorizing activities is funded through a 2 percent (and in some cases less than 2 percent) administrative fee from authorized schools.⁴ Fordham also subsidizes some authorizing cost activities, making up the other 5-10 percent of budgeted costs in a given year. Salaries, benefits, and payroll taxes make up the largest portion of the budget (approximately 64 percent), followed by technology fees (8 percent), rent (6 percent), insurance (4 percent), travel (4 percent), and grants to schools for specific projects (4 percent). The office also pays for other items, all at or below 3 percent of their annual budget, for office/administrative expenses, professional and legal fees, consultants, and professional memberships.

Human Capital Identification and Development

Fordham has a very informal process for hiring and staff development. Stakeholders noted they have an organizational philosophy of hiring for organizational fit, believing the organization has the capacity to teach the mechanics of required job functions. While hiring has been rare—only one of the four people in the authorizing unit has been hired within the last year—staff described the process as being informal and relying on networks of pre-existing relationships. Typically, when a position becomes open, staff access networks (both national, school-based, and community-based) to get the word out that the position is available but typically already have internally brainstormed candidates of interest. The hiring process was also described as informal, including meetings typically with leaders in each of Fordham’s three units. Fordham has no external or organizational constraints on compensation other than what the budget will allow and the strategic positioning of the new hire in organizational priorities.

Each staff member has individual professional and personal development goals that are developed and/or revised annually. Professional goals include priority areas aligned with unit and organizational goals the individual staff member will achieve. Personal goals are specific to

interpersonal areas of interest or development that enable higher levels of staff satisfaction and skill development enabling professional goal achievement. Progress towards meeting goals is reviewed informally on a frequent basis and formally every six months. Annual bonuses and potential raises are tied to goal achievement. As a relatively small and “flat” unit, conversations on promotion have not been raised to date.

The authorizing unit has a number of management systems—used informally as noted by staff—designed to manage staff performance, share information, and provide performance feedback. Those include:

- **Full staff retreats.** Every 18 months or so, all Fordham staff from each unit meets in person to team-build and discuss organizational priorities, success, and challenges.
- **Bi-weekly senior staff meetings.** Senior staff from each of the three units meets every other week. The purpose of these meetings is to share information and ensure alignment on any upcoming activities with implications for other units or the organization as a whole.
- **Standing weekly team meetings.** Typically, the Vice President for Sponsorship develops an agenda for this meeting, but the conversations that ensue tend to be informal.
- **Informal check-ins with staff.** The authorizing unit does not have formal weekly one-on-one meetings between supervisors and direct reports. According to staff, the smallness of their operation allows for more frequent one-on-one informal check-ins on work products and achievement. As described by staff, “There are only four of us. We check in with each other multiple times a day and know what each other is working on daily.”
- **Goal conversations.** The Vice President for Sponsorship meets frequently with each staff member to discuss progress towards goal achievement and has individual formal meetings with staff every six months.

⁴ As of July 1, 2016 Fordham switched to a new fee structure. That structure includes 2% for the first 300 students, and then decreases as enrollment increases.

Relationships with Entities Outside of the Authorizing Office

Stakeholders noted organizations both internal and external to Fordham that play important roles intersecting with authorizing functions.

Ohio Committee. The Ohio Committee is one of three committees established by the Fordham Board of Trustees. It is composed of select members of the Fordham Board of Trustees and other people the Board believes can help with making sense of and engaging authorizing, school, and Ohio state policy information. Specific to authorizing, the goal of the Ohio Committee is to help staff think through issues (upcoming high-stakes decisions, in particular) that come up in the course of authorizing work and ultimately to help in coming to recommendations for the full Board's consideration. The Committee has met three times each year in the past, although less frequently in the last two years. The agenda is typically organized around two areas, policy and research, and authorizing and charter schools. The Committee engages staff in high-level conversations and also gets "into the weeds" on findings from site visits and visits Ohio Committee members have taken to board meetings of individual charter schools.

Other Internal Units. Stakeholders described the relationship between the five internal Fordham units—authorizing, Ohio policy, national research, external relations, and finance/operations—as being collegial, helpful, and necessary, as all units benefit from relationships with each other. Specific to authorizing, stakeholders noted the benefit received from the policy and advocacy shop in helping to review applications, participating in site visits, and helping to compile data for meetings of the Board of Trustees. In addition, the finance and operations unit handles all human resource responsibilities for the organization, including for the authorizing unit. Authorized schools have also benefited from units outside of the authorizing shop: schools have been linked to other units for a range of optional support services, including policy clarification/interpretation, brainstorming on new school operation approaches, and accessing Fordham's national network for school development support, among others. While schools may access these resources to the degree helpful, all

stakeholders noted these resources are voluntary and, importantly, feel fully voluntary on behalf of schools.

Ohio Department of Education (ODE): Stakeholders described the relationship between Fordham's authorizing unit and the ODE as multifaceted and generally positive. They noted that the ODE's attempts to hold authorizers accountable were welcome, noting the overall low performance of too many charter schools in Ohio and lack of professional authorizing practices among too many Ohio authorizers (while also noting challenges with how authorizer accountability implementation has been conducted to date). Stakeholders noted that the ODE has some inherent conflicts, as it is an authorizer itself, implements authorizer oversight and accountability, and implements state policy. These different functions have created some conflicts, but Fordham largely views the role of the ODE and its intentions as necessary.

Other Entities: Stakeholders noted that while they are hopeful more educational reform organizations/entities will take an active interest in Ohio in general and the Dayton area specifically—and Fordham is actively trying to facilitate such opportunities—there are few such organizations presently. As noted earlier, challenges related to state reputation, human capital, funding, and facilities are believed to be the areas where the need for solutions is greatest, driven by state policy changes, philanthropy, and other private organizations. Stakeholders noted that there have been some school leaders in their portfolio trained by human capital providers over the years—including Building Excellent Schools and The Fisher Fellowship (KIPP), among others—but there is not a robust school development infrastructure across Ohio and specifically in the Dayton area.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Basic Values

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's (Fordham) basic values are expressed in its mission statement, as described previously, as well as prominently displayed on their website. Further, the Dayton Strategic Plan speaks of "an organizational culture that prizes risk-taking, a sense of urgency, and a commitment to excellence."

Notably, it's "excellence" that came up directly and frequently in interviews. The word was repeated with emphasis as the first and most important value of the organization. There's somewhat less certainty about entrepreneurship and innovation as central values; few applicants have come up with something fundamentally new in the past few years. There's more emphasis on what actually works, and replicating quality is valued more than looking for a new gimmick.

There's another feature distinctive to the Fordham culture. From the early days, there has been the desire to be an exemplar in Fordham's authorizing work. As reported in Ohio's Education Reform Challenges, a book by Checker Finn, Terry Ryan, and Mike Lafferty, Fordham got into the business largely because Ohio lacked good authorizers, and it wanted to provide an example of what quality authorizing looked like. Fordham's latest Annual Report leads with a paean to Ohio's new authorizer evaluation program, for which Fordham fought and which is among its organizational goals in the larger Fordham plan: "Three other organizations are using our stuff." So there is clearly an orientation to action and results beyond simply authorizing good charter schools.

How Values and Intentions are Communicated

Said one staffer, "We model excellence." Fordham is "not sloppy" in its work and tries to be crystal-clear in its communications with schools. There is more emphasis on these internal aspects of accountability among the staff and Board than there is cheerleading for a list of corporate values.

View of Charters and Relationship to Schools

Given that Fordham's leadership includes several of the most authoritative voices in the education reform field, it's no secret that Fordham is considered pro-charter. Rather than having a single view of what that means (i.e., "system catalyst" vs. "choice option"), Fordham has engaged vigorously in debates over the history and prospects of the movement since its inception. But Fordham has always been a "critical friend" far more than a flag-waving advocate, often arguing for stronger oversight, default closure, and other policies that draw criticism from more expansionist and laissez-faire sectors.

Its relationship to schools can still be characterized as it was in a 2006 Education Week interview quoting early Fordham leaders: "If [schools] are organizationally strong and they're delivering the goods, our approach is to, as much as possible, stay out of their way and encourage their development and improvement."

There is a certain modesty and tension to balance in how staff relate to schools. "We don't know it all. There are experts in the buildings, and we need to listen," the senior staffers said. Staff used several different terms to describe Fordham's relationship to schools: "customer service," "overseer of public funds," and "supporting choice for families." It could be argued that there is tension among these views, but staff aims to keep them in balance, since "we're responsible to kids and parents" but also have to respect schools' autonomy.

Functionally, the relationship between Fordham and authorized schools is clearly defined. Ohio statute requires three formal site visits per year, and Fordham adds more but only if necessary. Staff aim to keep these tightly focused on compliance with the charter and its alignment with the approved program, so reports are directly observational with no editorializing and no bias for any particular pedagogy. Fordham staff also attend school board meetings, which they say helps to build rapport with the schools.

As a result of this and many other less formal check-ins, "We're close with our schools," one staffer said. "We know

their issues and constraints.” Having strong relationships “makes the tough conversations easier.”

Finally, although Ohio law requires authorizers to provide technical assistance, Fordham doesn’t sell services to schools and takes a conservative view of what assistance is appropriate.

External vs. Internal Focus

Fordham could easily afford to have a sharply internal focus, given the intellectual capital present across the organization. The authorizing unit certainly uses the work of the other units; when Fordham comes out with a new report on charter schooling or teacher quality, the authorizing unit scoops it up. But staff also reach out to other sources. One is NACSA, whose work and conference are “the most substantive” of the national options and helps them to avoid “reinventing the wheel,” according to staff. They’ve had less fortunate dealings with Ohio’s charter organizations, however, differing with the authorizing group over issues of quality and selling services. Fordham is seen by some of these groups as an outlier, pursuing its own agenda rather than working with the rest of the state.

Role of Leadership

Fordham has a wealth of leadership talent, and that could be a problem. But it is resolved in part by the clear assignment of leadership for the authorizing function to the Vice President for Sponsorship in Dayton, with other Fordham officials and Board weighing in as needed but in a supportive posture. In the organizational chart, one responsibility for the head of the authorizing office is “strategic thinking.” The incumbent serves on the senior leadership team. So this is clearly an important function—and it works because the Vice President for Sponsorship is a strong, thoughtful leader leaving no vacuum to be filled.

Role of Charter Office in Context

“Authorizing is different and [in] some ways harder than publishing papers,” one staff member put it, but there are benefits to nesting Fordham’s work within that of a policy-research outfit. The authorizing unit taps both other units for reviewers and site visitors, and doing these activities also helps keep staff working on think-tank projects

grounded. “We borrow ideas from the policy shop...and we test out the think-tank stuff,” as a staffer put it.

Whatever the overall organizational chart, the authorizing staff feel they have needed autonomy to do their job. As one staffer put it, “The ‘how’ is left up to us.”

To be sure, the various players bring their own interests to the table. Some staffers in the executive unit have a keen interest in curriculum, for example, but the authorizing unit holds that an authorizer must be “curriculum agnostic” so long as it meets standards and produces results. This view seems to have prevailed, with the executive unit deferring to the authorizing unit for now, which speaks to the respect the executive unit has for the authorizing staff.

To be sure, there has been some gear-grinding among the units at times. There was one instance in which the policy and advocacy unit issued FOIA requests to schools without notifying the authorizing unit. That kind of thing is now handled by routine notification about any Fordham initiative that might in some way involve authorizing.

Growth Mindset

The expedited review process for expansion and replication applications is remarkably straightforward and speaks to strong encouragement for growth of quality schools.

There are some notable absences in the portfolio—no for-profit networks and no virtual schools (and in the latter case, that means forgoing potentially significant revenue). These are not the results of explicit Fordham policies; those entities just haven’t applied. Staff believe that this is directly related to Fordham’s emphasis on excellence and to the role it played in decoupling a school from Edison, its for-profit management company. If all that limits portfolio growth, so be it, according to staffers.

In short, as one staff member put it, “The goal is not 100 schools but the right schools.” In fact, growth over the past two years has all been through adding classes, not schools; as one staffer said, “The goal is to expand opportunities for kids,” not necessarily to add more schools.

Entrepreneurial vs. Compliance-driven Attitude

As noted earlier, there's less direct intention to be "entrepreneurial" than in Fordham's early days in the sense of looking for truly unique school models. But if that term refers to an authorizer's identification of needs to be filled by charter applicants, Fordham is certainly fulfilling that role in its devotion to Dayton. By encouraging good schools to expand—for example, by supporting the growth of DECA Prep—Fordham is providing a concerted response to the dearth of good school choices for Dayton families.

Like all Ohio authorizers, Fordham must devote a lot of attention to compliance. During 2016, Fordham found itself in an ironic position. The organization advocated for tough authorizer-evaluation measures, but the revised process strained the organization, with reams of documentation being uploaded to the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) over the summer. Ordinary renewal processes have been spliced by statutory prohibition of approvals lasting longer than the authorizer's own contract, so one-year extensions are being given with the understanding that an additional process will be required once the ODE has given Fordham its own renewal. (It should be noted that under the original evaluation process, scrapped after challenges with ratings for virtual schools, Fordham was initially awarded an "exemplary" rating.)

Process vs. Professional Judgment

Although Fordham has taken great care to create solid processes, decisions inevitably rely on the wealth of professional judgment present in Fordham staff and on the Board of Trustees. "Fordham always wants discretion, not a point score," as one staffer put it, and written into every performance plan is that the authorizer reserves such discretion. This is especially important where there are some gray areas: for example, what to do when a school is in trouble but doesn't meet the threshold for formal probation. There is no formal process for intervention. Red flags may come from any direction—state agencies, funding issues, and safety issues, for example. There are certain trigger points staff look for (a sudden change in special education enrollment percentage, for example), but there is no rubric, and the nature and extent of intervention

is "totally professional judgment," as the authorizing staff put it.

What makes this work, apart from the caliber of the personnel, is an emphasis on teamwork. "We hire for fit," one said. "We like each other," said another, "and there is genuine respect for each other." There is a non-hierarchical feel to the office. "We all answer the phone and get coffee."

APPLICATION SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

Stakeholders noted the contributions of both staff expertise and strong practices to the success of the charter application process of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Fordham). Fordham has an experienced staff whose experiences with successful schools and tough closures inform their professional judgment in the application process. Staff are aligned in purpose and in their understanding of their organization's standards for quality. While they recognize that charter authorizing requires significant professional judgment, they also rely on strong, established application processes.

What follows are descriptions of the charter school application systems and processes of Fordham.

Priorities for New Charter School Authorization/Application Philosophy

Open to all school types. Fordham does not currently set priorities for new charter schools. They are open to any and all types of applications, whether from existing operators or new independent (not management organization affiliated) operators. In their view, every existing charter school operator was unproven at one time, and they never want to be in a space where they approve only operators with proven track records. That said, Fordham's authorizing staff noted that independent applicants face barriers that existing operators do not; they have difficulty demonstrating that they are likely to have a positive impact on the students that they want to serve and the organizational viability and board capacity to successfully operate a new school. Because of its history in the city, Fordham's focus for new charter schools is in Dayton. However, "If you have a really great school, we will take you...We would love to add you anywhere in the state."

Focus on quality. In the early days of Fordham's engagement with charter schools, the organization was "focused on quantity, rather than quality." They wanted as many charter schools opened in Dayton as possible. Eventually, particularly when they began authorizing, Fordham became an early convert to the proposition that more is not better and that quality is more important. Fordham's Board of Trustees would like to see more high-

quality charter schools in Ohio and would like Fordham to authorize more high-quality charter schools in Dayton and other high-need areas across the state. However, they are not focused on reaching a particular portfolio size. Interviewees characterized the organization as eager to expand but somewhat more risk averse, more selective, and more "fussy" about quality than in the past: "We would love to see our portfolio grow to 15-20 schools but only if they are great." Fordham considers itself to be a highly selective authorizer. Interviews reflected a belief that a reputation as a highly selective authorizer has impacted the quality and number of the applications Fordham has received.

Other factors influencing new schools. Stakeholders highlighted a number of contextual factors that have influenced Fordham's new school strategy. The biggest barrier for charter operators in Ohio, especially independent schools, is the lack of resources, according to stakeholders. Low per-pupil funding, facility access, and funding for schools have likely limited the interest of many nationally recognized charter management organizations: "We would love to bring more great charter operators to Dayton, but until they can convince those operators to come to the city, it doesn't make sense for the organization to focus its efforts there." Staff also suggested that market saturation in some places and overall low school quality has impacted charter quality and made Fordham more selective, slowing their growth.

These contextual factors have contributed to a portfolio growth strategy that is focused on expanding enrollment within their existing schools rather than authorizing new charter schools. According to one interviewee, "We have to rely more than we ever wanted to on growing home-grown networks." While Fordham's context may limit interest from recognized charter operators, stakeholders characterized the focus on organic growth as a fundamentally important contributor to the success of Fordham's charter school portfolio. Encouraging the replication and expansion of high-performing schools removes the uncertainties associated with new operators and minimizes the impact on students associated with changes in school culture between schools. This focus on expansion of existing schools rather than opening new schools is reflected in Fordham's plan to significantly expand the enrollment of the Dayton Early College

Academy schools, a successful charter school operator authorized by Fordham.

Application Process

Fordham has an extensive, multi-stage process for approving new charter schools. Rather than having a set application timeline, Fordham has a rolling application process. They have made this choice so that they won't lose charter applications to authorizers with more flexible timelines. Fordham also does not release a request for proposals and does not require a Letter of Intent. The application process begins with informal conversations with applicants. A formal written application follows with review by a team of internal and external application evaluators. Applicants are reviewed against established criteria. An application review team interviews qualified applicants. After the interview process, review teams meet again to generate a recommendation for approval or denial. What follows is a description about how application decisions are made from receipt of the written application to final decision making by the Fordham Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Resources for Applicants/Initial Conversations.

Fordham provides a variety of resources to applicants on their website, including a sample blank application, as well as documents describing the application process and timeline and Fordham's authorizing structure and background. Application evaluation criteria are included with the application template. Fordham staff regularly field informal inquiries from interested charter applicant groups. While no formal application decisions are made as a result of these conversations, conversations with applicants act as an initial screening mechanism, enabling authorizing staff to talk to operators about the authorizer-school fit and confirm alignment.

Initial Review. Newly submitted applications are reviewed for "sufficiency" by the Director of Applications and Contracts. There is no formal application checklist at this stage. Instead, this is a professional review for completeness. The Director also conducts basic due diligence at this stage, consisting of Google searches as well as Dun & Bradstreet reports and legal cases/court filings. In addition to completeness, the Director looks for "outlandish" or inappropriate issues in the application (e.g., an applicant with felony embezzlement on their record seeking to hold a position as treasurer). Feedback

is given to applicants via phone calls to clear problems in the application. Staff characterized this decision-making stage as a professional conversation with verbal denial, as needed.

Formal Review of Written Application. Each evaluator reviews the application on their own using Fordham's established application criteria. Then evaluators meet to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the application, come to consensus on a rating for each criteria area, and decide whether or not to approve an application for an interview. Applicants can be denied at this stage.

Application Areas. Fordham's written application is divided into seven sections (with subsections). The application provides writing prompts for each section and requires applicants to include specific attachments with their responses.

Cover Sheet. In the cover sheet, applicants are asked to provide basic contact information related to the school and the education management organization (if any). Applicants are also required to provide five-year projected enrollment by grade and information about facilities planning.

Education Plan. Applicants are asked to describe the school's mission, vision, and educational philosophy and to provide an overview of the instructional methods; any research or experience that indicates why the approach is appropriate for the anticipated student population; the geographic boundaries of the enrollment area of the school; plans for curriculum and instruction; the anticipated student population and how the school will align with the educational needs of the population; the school calendar and daily schedule; the school's philosophy regarding educating special student populations, including how students will be identified, plans for their education, how their education will be monitored, and how the school is budgeted and staffed to meet the needs of those students; a description of how the school will develop and sustain a safe and orderly school climate, including the discipline policy for the general student population and for students with special needs; key academic and non-academic goals and how those goals align with the school mission and educational program; any additional assessments outside of those required by the state; and a description of prior success that the developer has had in improving student academic outcomes.

Financial Plan. Applicants are asked to provide a school budget using a Fordham-designed Microsoft Excel file. The description must include startup and first-year budgets with assumptions, first-year monthly cash flow projections with assumptions, and a five-year budget plan with assumptions. The plan must also include letters of commitment from any outside sources of funding, property, or resources. Applicants are also required to describe the systems and procedures for managing the school's finances and identify the staff positions responsible for financial oversight and management. Also required in this area are a transportation plan (including for students with special needs), a food service plan, a description of health services that will be provided, a description of any other partnerships, information about insurance coverage, and a pre-opening plan that documents key tasks to be completed between charter approval and the opening of the school.

Organizational and Governance Plan. Applicant groups must provide a description of the governing body, including a list of its members with qualifications, a description of the board's views of the relationship between itself, the school leader, and any management entity, and must discuss board training plans. Applicants must also describe the organizational structure of the school and its day-to-day operation, including an explanation of the roles and responsibilities of administrators in their management of every aspect of school operations; the desired qualifications, credentials, and resume (if selected) of the principal candidate; and an organizational chart that describes the lines of authority and reporting between the governing board, staff, any related bodies (such as advisory bodies or parent teacher associations), and any external organizations, such as management companies that will play a role in school operations. Applicants must also describe plans for staffing, including personnel policies and professional development. Finally, applicants must describe student recruitment and enrollment plans, list potential community partners, and explain how the school will encourage family involvement to support student learning.

Facilities. Applicants must include an agreement that specifies which entity will own all charter school facilities and property, and a description of the facility, its annual leasing or mortgage costs, and the name of the landlord or lender and relationship to the operator.

Blended Learning. If the school plans to operate using a blended learning model (as defined by Ohio law), the operator is required to provide an extensive description of the model and how it will be implemented at the school.

Assurances. Applicants are required to acknowledge, agree to, and comply with a list of 16 legal assurances.

Application Checklist. The application checklist affirms that the applicant has submitted all required information, certifies that the signer has the authority to submit the application, and requires the signer to attest that all information is complete and accurate.

Review Teams. During the formal review of the written application, applications are reviewed by a team of Fordham staff and external application reviewers. The Director of Applications and Contracts selects review team members. Different review teams are composed depending on the application, but two Fordham staff members are on every review team: the Director of Applications and Contracts and the. Additional reviewers include Fordham staff in their Columbus (policy and advocacy unit) and DC (executive and research unit) offices, as well as external contractors with relevant subject/content knowledge. Reviewers are selected, and teams are assembled based on expertise and team fit. The Director of Applications and Contracts is very selective when composing review teams, ensuring that strong perspectives and strengths are balanced. Reviewers are familiar with Fordham and its values. Fordham provides training to new reviewers to orient them to the process and teach them what a quality application looks like. Reviewers are instructed not to conduct outside research or consider information outside of the application in their evaluation.

Charter Applicant Due Diligence. As part of the formal review of the written application, Fordham gathers research on applicants. This research typically includes accountability performance indicators for any existing schools run by the operator, disclosure and explanation of any existing or potential conflicts of interest between the school governing board and any proposed service providers or related businesses, and financial forecast and audit information for existing schools. Due diligence research is conducted by Fordham staff and includes a Dun & Bradstreet financial review, research on administrative court records, talking to other authorizers

who authorize related schools, and gathering data from Ohio and other states on school performance. Reviewers receive this information via email to be considered during their review of the written application.

Evaluation Rubric and Reviewer Feedback. Reviewers and the Director of Applications and Contracts provide comprehensive, written feedback on the entire application using the evaluation rubric and Fordham’s online application management system (Epicenter). Written feedback is structured around reviewer ratings of three of the applications sections (i.e., educational plan, financial plan, and organizational plan) and their subsections. Reviewers also identify remaining questions to be addressed by the applicant group if the applicant group moves forward to the interview stage. Fordham expects each reviewer to provide a rationale for any statements or conclusions included in reviewer comments. Feedback in each application section is divided into three areas. In the “Strengths” area, evaluators identify notable positive aspects of the applicant’s response. In the “Concerns and Additional Questions” area, evaluators identify weaknesses and issues to be explored during the debrief call and/or applicant interview. In the “Interview Questions” area, evaluators list questions for the applicant. Evaluators are expected to review the Education, Organizational, and Financial Plans and assign a rating of “Meets,” “Approaches,” “Partially,” or “Does Not Meet” for each section. Evaluators are not asked to provide a recommendation for approval.

Following review feedback submission, the Director of Applications and Contracts reviews the individual reviewer rubrics and develops an agenda for one 90-minute conference call. The Director forwards the agenda to the reviewers prior to the debrief call. During the call, the Director guides the team through the agenda. Evaluators come to consensus on the rating of each section of the application and identify specific questions, issues, and areas of concern that should be addressed if the applicant is interviewed. Review teams have been successful in all cases except one in reaching consensus. Staff attribute this high rate of consensus to strong and positive team dynamics. Reviewers are expected and encouraged to talk openly and objectively about the merits of each application.

Following the debriefing meeting, the Director drafts the team’s analysis and submits the analysis to Fordham’s

senior staff. The analysis does not include point scores. Fordham authorizing staff make a recommendation to the Vice President for Sponsorship, who decides whether to move the application forward to the interview process. Denied applicants receive written notification that their application was not approved. Fordham does not have set criteria, but general practice is that (a) applicants with very low ratings in most categories do not receive an interview and (b) if an applicant has some low, moderate, and strong areas, they give that applicant the “benefit of the doubt” and move them to the interview stage.

Interview. The same review team responsible for evaluating the written application interviews applicants invited to interview. Interviews are generally in person at Fordham’s Dayton office. However, some applicant group members may join via videoconference.

Prior to the interview, the review team receives an agenda that provides directions regarding how the interview will be conducted. The document reviews the consensus ratings of each application section and the overall application and describes the interview process. The agenda includes critical and less critical questions to be asked during the interview and assigns them to review team members. The applicant group receives a notice that describes the purpose of the interview, makes any requests for additional information from the applicant, lists the attendees, and includes a brief agenda.

Two Fordham staff attend every interview, regardless of the application. Others from Fordham join individual interviews depending on the applicant. Typically, both outside consultants and Fordham staff from the DC and Columbus offices attend interviews. Fordham recommends the school leader (if chosen), key board members, treasurer (if chosen), or others integral to the school development process attend the interview. They limit the number of attendees from the applicant to approximately seven at most. For any given application, all members of the review team attend the applicant interview.

All evaluators in attendance review the application before the interview. The Director of Applications and Contracts leads the interview, ensuring that all questions raised during the evaluation of the paper application are addressed. Staff noted that making sure that all questions raised during the process are answered is key to achieving consensus on the application recommendation later. Staff

characterized the interview as a key tool for assessing school leadership. Many applicants can pass “on paper.” The interview serves a critical role in evaluating the capacity of the applicant. For example, interviews have identified conflicts between instruction, governance, and operations (e.g., board members who don’t understand whether the treasurer should report to the board or the charter management organization).

After the interview is completed, the review team discusses the interview and the responses of the applicant to determine whether the applicant sufficiently addressed the questions posed. The review team uses the same rubric used to evaluate the paper application and comes to consensus on a rating on each section of the application. The team also decides on a supporting rationale for each conclusion. The Director takes the consensus ratings and rationales from the post-interview meeting and drafts a final evaluation report. The final report is submitted to the Vice President for Sponsorship.

Expedited Review/Specialized Applicants. To assist with the expansion and replication of high-performing charter schools, Fordham has developed an expedited application process for qualified applicants. To qualify for the expedited process, (a) at least one of the applicant’s schools must have been authorized by Fordham for at least three years, (b) all schools authorized by Fordham must meet the terms of Fordham’s Academic and Organizational Accountability Plan, and (c) the model for the proposed school must be substantially similar to the applicant’s existing schools. The operator is required to submit any proposed changes to their existing school models and/or plans. No interview is required. Authorizing staff review facilities plans, finances, and any changes but typically do not review program areas. Staff then make a recommendation to the Ohio Committee (described later in this section). The Committee discusses the merits of the recommendation and makes a recommendation to Fordham’s Board of Trustees. If the Board approves the Committee’s recommendation, a contract for the school is drafted and executed.

Charter Schools Transferring to Fordham. Fordham considers several factors when deciding whether or not to approve the transfer of an existing charter school overseen by another authorizer into the Fordham portfolio. Prior to consideration of a transfer application, the potential applicant submits current financial, audit, and academic performance information. Applicants who meet

a majority of Fordham’s performance and accountability metrics are invited to complete the application for new schools. Approval or denial is based on the past academic performance of the school, site visits by Fordham staff, a review of public information relevant to compliance, input from references that have worked with the organization, and the fiscal health of the school. The above information is reviewed by Fordham staff. Staff then make a recommendation to the Ohio Committee regarding whether to approve transfer. The Committee discusses the merits of the recommendation and makes a recommendation to Fordham’s Board of Trustees. If Fordham’s Board approves the recommendation, the parties work together to execute the new assignment. Recent law has curbed most transfers and changed how authorizers consider them. Prior to the law, authorizers had casual conversations about transfers. Now, state policy levies severe consequences on authorizers with low-performing schools, making the existing school’s academic performance among the most important considerations for transfer. According to interviews, a school must be outstanding for any authorizer to even consider a transfer under new state policy.

President Involvement in Application Decision Making. The Vice President for Sponsorship reviews the recommendation and rationale provided by the Director of Applications and Contracts. The President is then informed that a staff recommendation is ready. Denied applications are not reviewed by any staff beyond the Vice President for Sponsorship, but the President and Board of Trustees are notified of every application received. Fordham senior staff then notify Fordham’s Ohio Committee of the applications that are recommended for approval.

The Ohio Committee. The Ohio Committee is composed of four members of the larger Fordham Board. The Ohio Committee does not review the full application, nor does it review the recommendation summary and rationale written by the Director of Applications and Contracts. Instead, Fordham senior staff send the Committee a short summary of the application evaluation (one to two pages). The summary includes a basic description of the school (e.g., background of founders, enrollment plans, planned opening date, school model), with a recommendation for contract length. The Ohio Committee discusses the application and sends the recommendations to the full Board. The Committee hasn’t made any decisions recently

outside of the full Board. According one interview, “The Board is so small that there isn’t really a need.”

Fordham Board of Trustees. The Fordham Board of Trustees has nine members and meets three times a year. Fordham senior staff or the Committee make application recommendations to the Board. The Board is the final decision maker. The application summary provided to the Board is similar in content to the summary considered by the Ohio Committee. In some instances, the Board will vote to approve an application before the applicant interview and due diligence has been completed. In these cases, the approval is contingent upon a successful interview and satisfactory due diligence research results. All recommendations are resolved with an up or down vote. On at least one occasion, the Board voted to approve an application contingent upon the results of the interview and due diligence research. Interviewed staff could not recall an application recommendation for approval made by the Ohio Committee but rejected by the Board.

Communication to Applicants. If a denied applicant went through the interview stage, they receive a formal notification of their denial and a summary document that describes the specific reasons for the denial. The summary document provides an overall rating with rationale along with ratings and rationales for each section of the application. Approved applicants receive a formal notification of approval.

Access and Equity Issues in the Application Process

Fordham is dedicated to protecting access to charter schools and maintaining equity for students of all backgrounds but is not proscriptive. Instead, they focus on what is required by law. Fordham requires applicants to describe their plans for special education students, English Learners, and student discipline. They ask applicants for target demographics (as required by law) and ask questions when a school’s proposed target demographics are significantly different than those of the district, but they don’t take any action on that information. Instead, they view such imbalances as an indicator of whether or not the applicant group has the capacity to know the students they will serve. Fordham wants schools to be successful with all students, but they don’t see their role as cultivating different plans or models related to access and equity.

Pre-Opening Systems and Practices

The opening procedures process begins with Fordham awarding a contract to a community school (charter school). Fordham provides schools with a checklist that summarizes the pre-opening process for charters and identifies the action items that must be completed prior to the school’s opening. This checklist has 18 tasks that Fordham considers essential to the setup of a new charter school in Ohio. The tasks include things from obtaining an Employer Identification Number and nonprofit status for tax purposes to a list of trainings that school staff must complete before the school year begins. Schools are asked to submit most of the checklist items via Epicenter, the online organization and performance management system Fordham utilizes to monitor its schools.

Additionally, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) requires charter school authorizers to submit assurances documentation on behalf of all their schools, old and new, 10 days prior to the first day of school of each new school year or use of a new facility. If the authorizer does not sign the assurances, then the school cannot open that year. Thus, as the authorizer, Fordham is required to conduct annual pre-opening site visits to verify that schools are in compliance and collect evidence related to the assurances. The assurances list covers primarily issues of school safety and operation, such as an assurance that the school has obtained a certificate of occupancy for the space and has received satisfactory health and fire inspections.

The most typical “snag” schools run into during the pre-opening process is related to building construction. For example, obtaining a certificate of occupancy can sometimes take longer than expected, especially for new construction. Fordham has never not allowed a school to open due to such problems, but they have had to ask for extensions from the ODE.

Performance Framework

Fordham’s Performance Framework is based on a charter school’s performance in the areas of academics, finance, organization/operations, and governance. It is aligned with the state’s “report card” measures, with an emphasis on the state performance index (weighted proficiency rate).

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Currently, the framework is split into “primary” and “secondary” indicators, with primary indicators having more weight than secondary ones.

Primary indicators include:

- Performance Index (PI)
- Value Added (VA)
- Graduation Rate (4 years)
- Graduation Rate (5 years)
- K-3 Literacy Improvement
- Performance vs. Local Market: PI
- Performance vs. Local Market: VA
- Performance vs. Statewide Charters: PI
- Performance vs. Statewide Charters: VA

Secondary indicators include:

- VA: Overall Grade
- PI: Overall Grade
- VA: Gifted
- VA: Disabilities
- VA: Lowest 20 Percent
- VA: High School
- Annual Measurable Objectives (AMOs): Gap Closing
- College Admission Test Participation Rate
- College Admission Test Non-remediation Score
- Dual Enrollment Credits
- Industry Credentials
- Honors Diplomas Awarded
- Advanced Placement Participation Rate
- Advanced Placement Score
- International Baccalaureate Participation Rate
- International Baccalaureate Score
- College/Career Readiness Assessment
- School Regularly Administers Internal Growth Assessment
- School Met a Majority of Its Internal Goals

Additionally, there are various indicators related to financial measures of success, as well as primary and secondary operations/governance indicators.

For each indicator, a school can receive a rating of “Exceeds the Standard,” “Meets the Standard,” “Does Not Meet the Standard,” or “Falls Far Below the Standard.” Minimum requirements for each rating are built into the framework. Many of the primary academic indicators in the Performance Framework are based on comparative metrics, while the majority of secondary indicators focus on more absolute metrics. Because primary factors carry more weight, charters’ performance compared to one another is very important. For example, the Performance vs. Local Market: PI indicator compares PIs across all comparable schools, both traditional and charter, in the county in which a school is located. Fordham explained that they have always held local comparisons in high regard. As one Fordham staff member put it, “What if you’re struggling but all other schools around you suck? That’s why we need the local and state context.”

The Performance Framework is what Fordham uses to make determinations about renewal for charters. As discussed below, state charter law requires authorizers to use their Performance Frameworks to make renewal decisions and specifically states that primary indicators should be more heavily considered than secondary indicators. However, in the end, it is within the authorizer’s discretion to determine if a school has “achieved” the standards necessary for renewal.

This creates a tension in that some schools have expressed concern that in any given year leading up to renewal, since Fordham does not provide a summative rating across the indicators, it can be unclear where they “stand” with the authorizer. Thus, Fordham is considering implementing a new Performance Framework—one that rolls up the ratings into a summative score, providing a clearer picture of “standing.” Fordham has looked to DC’s charter board as a model for their new framework; however, they have delayed implementation because the state’s accountability system will be changing due to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). At the same time, Fordham staff are also concerned about creating any sort of framework that would decrease their flexibility to make intervention and renewal decisions.

Performance Accountability

Performance accountability decisions are almost exclusively based on the professional judgment of authorizing staff. Rather than use a uniform approach to compliance or performance issues, Fordham’s approach is individualized to the issue and the school. Several staff indicated that because their authorizing staff is small (four people) with relatively long tenures, they have built relationships with the schools over time and believe they know school needs and struggles. One staff member mentioned that they often engage in “doorway conversations” to talk with each other about how to best assist schools or address issues that come up. “Fordham has always landed on the discretion side. In every performance plan, we say renewal decisions will consider performance on the framework, but [decisions will] ultimately will be at the discretion of the Board of Trustees. As an organization, we would rather give ourselves that leeway,” said one staff member.

Fordham monitors their schools’ compliance with legal requirements, financial performance, and governance on an ongoing basis. Most of the documentation for compliance is turned in via Epicenter. They provide schools with a comprehensive calendar that lists when all compliance documentation is due. Examples of routine compliance monitoring include:

- **Finance:** Fordham staff routinely check (monthly) to see that schools’ funding matches their enrollment numbers. A Fordham staff member schedules monthly calls with each charter board’s treasurer, governing authority, and/or school leadership to discuss the school’s submitted financial reports.
- **Special Education:** Based on a monthly look at enrollment numbers, Fordham staff will flag any school that has a 10 percent increase or decrease in their special education population.
- **Staff:** Fordham checks for updates and changes to schools’ staff rosters quarterly.

Additionally, Fordham monitors school performance and compliance via site visits. Authorizers in Ohio are required by law to conduct at least two site visits for each of its charter schools per year. School visits consist of four key components:

- **Classroom Visits and Observations.** Fordham staff try to visit at least one English language arts class and one math class. They look for interactions between staff and students, how students are transitioning through the school, and school culture cues. Observations typically last 10–15 minutes per classroom and are transcribed. No official rubric is used to assess quality.
- **Visual Checks.** By law, Fordham is required to visually verify that schools have posted all required signage (such as public records request information) and that certain programs are being implemented (such as federal breakfast and lunch programs).
- **Staff and School Leader Interviews.** Before the site visit, school leaders are sent an “On-Site Review Questionnaire.” Fordham staff go over the questionnaire during their interview with the school leadership and incorporate the questionnaire and interview answers into a public site visit report.
- **Student Record Audits:** Fordham staff are required to pull a variety of student records to ensure that the records are complete and stored properly.

Site visit performance is not formally captured in the renewal criteria but are seen as valuable evidence if the Ohio Committee or Fordham Board have questions about a school’s environment when trying to make renewal decisions.

Fordham does not make use of a tiered intervention process or have a ladder of consequences for poor performance or contract violations. It also rarely uses corrective action plans. Instead, when violations become apparent, rather than create and use a formal policy, staff use their discretion and professional judgment to reach out to the school to ask, “What’s your plan for addressing this issue and when will it be fixed?” They also communicate in-person with the schools by attending board meetings and/or scheduling meetings with appropriate school personnel. Intervention takes place when deficiencies to contract, statute, or law have not improved over the contract term, based on continued monitoring and follow-up. Intervention may also occur if an issue arises that merits immediate attention, such as with a parent complaint.

Schools that earn a D or an F in the academic portion of the framework are automatically put on probation—the only formal sanction Fordham uses. While there is no formal intervention process, schools that are on probation may be asked for a more formal plan, similar to a corrective action plan. Also, while probation is a formal sanction, it does not entail a formal process. Fordham staff describes the process in this way: “There is no public meeting. It is under Ohio law. You put someone on probation, you need to meet, they develop a plan, but there is no public process. When they get a letter to go on probation, we meet or have a call with them. They ask, ‘What will happen? What do we need to do?’ We haven’t formalized it, but we ask them ‘What are you going to do to show us you have changed course?’”

Extension, Renewal, and Revocation

Fordham’s Board meets three times a year. The Ohio Committee is responsible for charter-related recommendations. They don’t have a structured meeting schedule but typically meet prior to the triannual Board meetings. Contract decisions, both for new schools and renewals, are generally made during October meetings. Initially, new charter schools are given five-year contracts. After that, schools can receive contracts for up to five years, but terms are discretionary and up to the Ohio Committee. Renewal terms depend on how the school is doing on the Performance Framework, with high-performing schools typically renewed for five years, mediocre schools for three years, and schools that are on probation or are otherwise struggling for one year.

The Vice President for Sponsorship and Dayton Initiatives is awarded autonomy and is entrusted to provide the Ohio Committee and the Fordham Board with evidence to back any recommendations to them on renewals and application approvals.

Schools eligible for renewal are sent notification of the renewal application, which includes a template to update the school’s academic, financial, governance, and operations plans; a description of the renewal process; and a renewal timeline. Fordham’s application process is web-based and is accessible via Epicenter, an online portal.

If it becomes clear to Fordham staff that a school is unlikely to be renewed, they begin working with the school and its board to discuss their options. Closure can

technically happen at any time, but typically Fordham works with schools over a period of one to two years to determine the best approach for closure. Thus far, Fordham has been able to counsel these at-risk schools to voluntarily relinquish their charters or “go quietly.” They have also had one school seek another authorizer.

Staff believe that termination/revocation is reserved for extreme, emergency circumstances. Fordham has never had to revoke a charter contract.

Replication and Growth

Fordham has taken steps to try to promote replication and growth among its portfolio. It included specific strategies to recruit new schools to open in the Dayton area and to grow local talent, and Fordham has taken affirmative steps to achieve those goals. In addition, they provide an enrollment growth incentive: for academically strong schools, they reduce their authorizer oversight fee to less than the 2 percent standard in exchange for meeting enrollment growth targets.

Fordham has found, however, that despite having structures and systems that encourage growth and replication, a number of constraints exist making progress on replication and growth far less robust than anticipated or hoped for. Fordham has found it difficult to bring new schools and operators to the region, citing a number of structural challenges, including low per-student funding and the area’s lack of appeal compared to other states and cities. Leadership suggested that a charter accelerator or some other entity within the education reform ecosystem would be quite helpful in recruiting and developing talent to start new schools. Fordham has modified its replication and growth agenda to focus almost exclusively on fostering the enrollment growth of existing schools. One example noted was the Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) that Fordham is actively assisting to grow the number of available seats and grade levels. A leader at Fordham described their efforts to invest in and help DECA expand in the following way: “DECA Prep is fantastic, and we’ve put our eggs in that basket to help them grow.”