

SNAPSHOT: A LOOK AT THOMAS B. FORDHAM FOUNDATION



“Outcomes in authorizing matter: you have to know whether, and to what extent, you’re impacting students and changing lives. Specifically, are the resources—time, money, people, professional development—substantially changing the education landscape for the better? NACSA’s in-depth work to identify practice-linked outcomes is important to the profession because it identifies key characteristics of top authorizers. This enables others in the field to capitalize on this information and in turn improve the sector as a whole.”

—Kathryn Mullen Upton, Vice President of Sponsorship & Dayton Initiatives, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

What is this case study about?

This case study takes a close look at how and why the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation (Fordham) does its authorizing work, providing big-picture oversight to charter schools in Ohio. It is one of five case studies at the heart of NACSA’s groundbreaking Quality Practice Project, which explores the authorizer practices associated with high-quality charter school portfolios.

Why Fordham?

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is one of the top charter school authorizers in the country, based on an 11-point evaluation of school portfolio and authorizer performance outcomes. Some facts of note about Fordham:

- By 2017-18, Fordham was authorizing 13 brick and mortar charter schools located throughout Ohio, educating just over 5,000 students.
- Fordham charter schools have full autonomy within the bounds of federal and state law. Fordham does not exert direct control or any undue influence over their schools’ governance, operations, or educational plans.
- The majority of its charter schools were in the “Very High” or “High” academic growth categories in Reading and Math at the time of NACSA’s analysis.

Leadership, Commitment, Judgment at Fordham



Leadership: Fordham has other functions besides authorizing; however, the authorizing work has never been subordinate to the other work of the organization. Fordham leadership and board recognize that the organization can have a positive and significant impact via the authorizing work, and they have supported that growth, due mainly to the replication and expansion of existing, high-quality charter school models. Fordham values risk-taking, a sense of urgency, and a commitment to excellence at all levels. It tries to be crystal clear in its communication with schools.



Commitment: Fordham has made an institutional commitment to quality authorizing since 2005, supporting this work financially and in terms of human capital. While day-to-day decisions are left to the authorizing staff, Fordham has a thoughtful, experienced, and engaged leadership team (which includes the head of Fordham’s authorizing shop) and board of trustees whose input helps to guide staff work and is critical to high-stakes decision making. Fordham’s commitment goes beyond quality authorizing of great schools: it seeks to be an exemplary authorizer for others to emulate.



Judgment: Fordham believes that box-checking should never drive decisions; rather, decisions should be made based on how students will best be served. They have created solid accountability mechanisms, but decisions ultimately rely on professional judgment. Staff use trigger areas more than rubrics. These trigger areas are performance indicators showing significant change in a school, which staff then investigate. They have no formal process for intervention. What makes it work? The caliber of personnel, teamwork, respect, and experience. Another example: Ohio’s law requires authorizers to provide technical assistance to their schools. Fordham takes a conservative view of what assistance is appropriate and doesn’t sell services to schools. They see school leaders as the experts, and respect school autonomy. If schools are producing the required outcomes, Fordham stays out of their way.

Who does this impact?

Fordham's institutional commitment to quality authorizing is reflected in the success of its schools, seen in trustees' decisions to approve expansions and replications of existing, high-performing school models. These models are then able to serve more students, which translates to a broader impact on successful student outcomes. One model has expanded from a founding class of 56 students to over 1,500 (and growing) today. This school perennially posts some of the highest student growth outcomes in the state.

Leadership is dedicated to a mission of giving more kids access to a great education, evident in Fordham's portfolio growth from 2,700 students in 2005, to 5,000 students in 13 schools (and growing) in five Ohio cities today.

Where can I learn more?

Charter school authorizers across the country can improve their own practices by asking new questions based on the findings throughout this case study and the corresponding report, "Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter Authorizing." Read more, including the full report based on findings from all five case studies, at <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research/quality-practice-project/>.