

SNAPSHOT: A LOOK AT METROPOLITAN NASHVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS



“The profession of authorizing has developed in many different ways over the last 20 plus years. The QPP is incredibly important as it seeks to link practices to outcomes and identify those practices that seem to result in high-quality educational opportunities for all students. While the project has not yet yielded a causal relationship between authorizer practices and outcomes, there are enough successful correlates to draw conclusions that there are indeed best practices and policies that, if applied, result in excellent opportunities for all students.”

—Carol A. Swann, Coordinator of Charter Schools, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

What is this case study about?

This case study takes a close look at how and why the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) does its authorizing work, providing big-picture oversight to charter schools in Nashville. 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 Nashville?

The Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) 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 MNPS:

- When the Charter Schools Office formed, MNPS was the authorizer of three existing and two soon-to-be-open charter schools. By 2017-18, MNPS was authorizer to 29 operating schools, and had closed four poor-performing schools.
- They have strongly encouraged those schools that serve students well to replicate, and as a result have several CMOs with as many as five schools in their network.
- The majority of Nashville charter schools demonstrated high academic growth across both Reading and Math with very few charter schools in the “Low” or “Very Low” academic growth categories of NACSA's analysis.

Leadership, Commitment, Judgment at MNPS



Leadership: After Charter Office leaders chose to partner with NACSA on a Formative Authorizer Evaluation, staff participated in NACSA's federally-funded work to study and develop exemplary policies and procedures relating to performance management, replication, and closure. Those rigorous authorizing policies and procedures shaped this strong charter sector. The Office's leadership sees themselves as a catalyst for change—including within the district. Collaborative but impatient, the Office feels a direct responsibility toward students that is its touchstone in relation to both the district and the schools it oversees.



Commitment: Since the inception of the Charter Office in 2009 to the time of our study, MNPS has been solely focused on providing students with more access to high-quality educational opportunities. At the time of our research, the office was an integral part of the district, and staff made recommendations directly to the board. Many of the authorizer's policies have been adopted statewide, and they are proud of their strong relationship with the state department of education. The district's last two strategic plans, MNPS Achieves (2009-13) and Education 2018: Excellence for Every Student (2013-18), have had a significant focus on transforming district operations and positioned charter schools as a district priority.



Judgment: The Office has created a successful, well-vetted application process that is key to the quality of their portfolio. With respect to oversight decisions, there are processes on the books for probation, but the actual decision to refer something to the Board is discretionary, relying heavily on the Director's professional judgment as to whether a particular infraction merits a frank conversation or raising the issue to the level of Board attention. The Charter Schools Office advocates for charter schools within the district, helping them navigate intra-district issues and ensuring that schools receive the resources and support they are entitled to. In a similar situation, some authorizers might dictate prescriptive mandates infringing on a school's autonomy, or not help schools navigate the complex and at times contentious relationships with district staff who hold unfavorable opinions of charter schools. Not so Nashville's charter office, which serves as an important bridge between schools and other district offices.

Who does this impact?

Nashville sees the raising of expectations and increasing quality opportunities as contagious. The district is significantly increasing outreach to and inclusion of its charter schools, creating partnerships to benefit students district-wide.

Two examples: Newcomer Academies, a district initiative to serve the district's high population of students whose first language is not English, are housed in charter schools; and one of the authorizer's charter partners opened its summer coding academy to all interested district students. The authorizer intends to expand these partnerships: they think a school's governance model is of no consequence if that school is instrumental in facilitating high student achievement.

Nashville believes that strong oversight, closing poorly performing schools, and encouraging replication of excellent ones, go together to create a robust charter sector. If any of those pieces are missing, the result is likely schools that do not move the needle for students academically, who are operationally deficient, and who are fiscally unsound. Those schools undermine public confidence in charter schools, and public education as a whole, not to mention the damage done to students.

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/>.