



ADDRESSING DATA GAPS DURING A PANDEMIC

**How Authorizers Can Continue to Hold
Charter Schools to High Standards**

Written By:

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and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers

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Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice. Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life. For more on Bellwether, please visit <https://bellwethereducation.org>.



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. For more on NACSA, please visit www.qualitycharters.org.



WHY AUTHORIZING MATTERS, ESPECIALLY DURING A PANDEMIC

What does it mean to uphold the bar for quality in the midst of a pandemic?

Quality, community-responsive authorizing creates public education opportunities for families and children by focusing on what works to meet the unique needs of every student. Great authorizers believe in the charter school promise and relentlessly pursue excellence, never backing down from their commitment to high standards, while working beside and with their communities and schools.

But COVID-19 has significantly shifted the way schooling looks.

School systems around the country found themselves in unprecedented predicaments during the 2019-20 school year. Many states canceled end-of-year assessments and hit pause on school performance scores and ratings. These disruptions have contributed to a wide variety of data gaps, leaving authorizers in uncharted waters as they navigate how best to assess schools on their obligation to provide an excellent education to every student.

The importance of robust, comprehensive assessments cannot be overstated. Quality assessments provide educators with important information on what content students have mastered and what remains a challenge. And when used correctly, students' performance, and more importantly, their growth, on such tests can shed light on how a school is meeting the needs of their students.

These challenging times also present an opportunity for authorizers to advance accountability beyond state assessments. Test results have never provided a complete picture. A school's goal should not just be to help a child survive post-graduation, but to thrive. That level of quality has to be measured more broadly.

If there was ever a time for authorizers to reflect on and consider changes to how they assess student learning, school performance, and quality, it is now.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE AND THE CORRESPONDING TOOLS

In Spring 2020, NACSA convened a working group of authorizers and other stakeholders to learn more about the challenges they faced, given the data gaps caused by COVID-19, and to ask what guidance was needed for the sector to adapt to these unusual circumstances.

Based on their feedback and insights, NACSA created this guide and accompanying resources (linked below) to support authorizers as they reflect on these challenges and opportunities. Authorizers are invited to:

- 1 | READ** this guide to gain context and spur thinking on what it means right now for authorizers to maintain high standards of accountability, regardless of the data gaps.
- 2 | COMPLETE**—with students, families, and educators—the Authorizer Worksheet (Tab 2 in our [Workbook](#)). The top row of Tab 2 provides key questions for authorizers to reflect on as they develop their approach to assessing student success and wellness. The rest of the spreadsheet is blank so authorizers can record their answers. The tabs that follow provide sample metrics across indicators. These metrics are not meant to be comprehensive. Authorizers should work with their schools and communities to determine if there are additional indicators and measures to consider.
- 3 | GATHER** ideas from the [Addressing Data Gaps During a Pandemic: A Toolkit for Authorizers](#). The Toolkit provides examples of how an authorizer might complete the Authorizer Worksheet, though only for one sample metric across each indicator.

Just as the pandemic has proven to be ever-changing, these resources are dynamic documents that may be updated as circumstances shift.

PRIORITIES, BASED ON OUR PRINCIPLES

Any work to hold schools to high standards should be guided by these priorities, which reflect our principles:

- **Assess to ensure access:** Charter schools should be accessible to all students. Assessing school quality plays a crucial role in ensuring equity and expanding access to a great education.
- **Serve all equitably:** We cannot address what we do not see. Data from diagnostic and/or baseline assessments spotlight systemic inequities and help leaders identify students and schools that need extra support so authorizers can ensure there are plans to provide those supports.
- **Protect student interests and reduce compliance burdens on educators:** These are both key responsibilities of authorizers.
- **Measure more than academics:** Authorizers should understand how well their portfolios of schools are serving students, looking at a more complete picture of school quality, beyond students' academic achievement.
- **Listen and respond to communities:** Community-responsive authorizing means authorizers listen to what students, families, and educators need and act boldly, even if that means doing things outside of traditional authorizing activities.
- **Build on knowledge:** Approaches to addressing current challenges should build on the work that authorizers have already been doing to create new ways to assess and communicate school quality and performance.
- **Adapt:** Authorizers are always adapting to new circumstances, including those of the current pandemic, which are likely to continue well into the 2020-21 school year and affect key authorizing decisions for years to come.
- **Use opportunities to innovate:** Adaptations should not narrowly focus on addressing current data gaps. COVID-19 forces a faster timeline for the evolution of accountability already underway. The strategies authorizers adopt now can help build the foundation to better assess what we value about school performance going forward.

REFLECTING AND ACTING ON ASSESSING SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

To identify meaningful ways to understand how well charter schools are serving students now, authorizers should first look carefully at how they have previously assessed school performance, the questions they are trying to answer with existing measures, and why those questions matter. This process cannot be done in isolation: to be done well, schools and families should be engaged early and often.

NACSA encourages authorizers to explore and answer, with both internal and external stakeholders:

- 1 | What are the key concepts/indicators in our current/past approach to assessing school quality? Are there other concepts/indicators related to school performance that become newly or more important to assess in a COVID-19 world?
- 2 | How have we measured school performance within these indicators?
- 3 | Why do we focus on these measures and metrics?
- 4 | What questions are we trying to answer?
- 5 | What kinds of decisions does this data inform? What are the stakes of these decisions for students, schools, communities, and authorizers?
- 6 | What problems or complications may prevent us from using those measures now?
- 7 | Are there other limitations of those measures that we were already concerned about or aware of?
- 8 | What are other ways to get at the questions these measures are intended to help us answer? What information are we currently collecting from schools that might address these questions? Is there additional information that schools are collecting that might help address these questions?
- 9 | Are there other information sources that would be useful to address these questions that authorizers and schools don't currently have, but potentially could? What are the barriers (including policy barriers) to using these other ways of assessing quality, or using them well? How and to what extent can we overcome these barriers?

WHAT ABOUT GOVERNANCE/OPERATIONS AND FINANCE?

Charter school accountability is often talked about as a three-legged stool: authorizers are asked to consider 1) financial performance; 2) operations/governance performance; and 3) academic/student performance. This document and the accompanying resources are focused on academic and student performance. Authorizers, charter school board members, and school leaders should work together to also determine how best to reflect on and to assess financial, operational, and governance health as well.

KEY INDICATORS FOR AUTHORIZERS TO ASSESS QUALITY

Since authorizers' contexts differ, each authorizer should reflect on and analyze the key indicators and metrics in their current/past approach to assessing school quality. NACSA advocates for authorizers to:

- review student progress over time, student achievement, post-secondary readiness, and mission-specific academic goals as part of charters' overall academic performance;
- when possible, disaggregate data within each indicator and metric so that subgroup performance is evident;
- consider additional indicators and metrics, including indicators of well-being and indicators related to closing opportunity gaps.

The indicators below may be helpful starting places for many authorizers. For a more detailed, though not exhaustive, list of potential metrics for each indicators, please see the [Workbook](#).

INDICATOR	METRIC EXAMPLE
Student Growth and Progress	Disaggregated data for student growth percentiles
Student Proficiency	Disaggregated data for proficiency rates relative to other schools or state average
Postsecondary Readiness	Disaggregated data for graduation rates
Mission- and Model-specific Goals	Extent to which school is implementing and students are completing certain practices aligned with school mission (e.g. students completing internship or Capstone)
Student and Family Engagement and Well-being	Disaggregated data for school climate surveys
Opportunity Gaps	Teacher-student race matching data

NACSA is not suggesting that authorizers will or should evaluate every one of these indicators in the ways listed; these are simply examples. However, authorizers should review their own performance frameworks to determine how they compare and to reflect on the nine guiding questions above.

Further, since authorizers do not typically have the authority to unilaterally change performance expectations (nor should they), authorizers and school operators need to work together on contractual changes that may arise when considering indicator and metric changes.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO ADAPT

The pandemic has disrupted education as we know it. It is unclear when, or if, things can go back to “normal”—or even if they should. Authorizers must adapt to fulfill their fundamental responsibility: to hold charter schools accountable for meeting the needs of students and families.

Authorizers must look carefully at how they have previously assessed school performance and understand the how and the why of what they have traditionally assessed. Only then can they adequately determine how to alternatively address data gaps.

Now is the time for authorizers to reflect on the measures that may help capture a more robust and comprehensive understanding of schools’ performance and consider changes.

We hope these resources will be useful to the field as authorizers determine how best to uphold the bar for quality for students and families.

[VIEW THE TOOLKIT](#)

[VIEW THE WORKBOOK](#)

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Authorizers typically see themselves as practitioners and not necessarily as advocates. However, during these unprecedented times, we strongly encourage authorizers to be vocal with policymakers about their struggles and their needs.

In some states, charter performance frameworks are tied directly to the state accountability system. Since accountability decisions, such as renewals, are often based on performance frameworks, it leaves little to no autonomy for the authorizer to make accountability decisions based on data outside of what is explicitly in law or policy when facing data gaps or when state accountability is paused. In situations like this, authorizers and their external partners could consider making the case to their policymakers for the authority to approach accountability in a different way.



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