



EXPANDING WHAT WORKS

**Practical Authorizing
Policies to Promote
Quality Growth**

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. needs more great public schools for kids, especially the most vulnerable students. Many charter schools across the country are doing phenomenal work with children, particularly [Black students, Latinx students, and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds](#).

Communities are calling for schools that can meet the needs and aspirations of their children and families. One way to meet this call is through the expansion and replication of high-performing charter schools that have proven effective in meeting student and family needs. Enabling growth among these high-performing charter schools requires both policy solutions and improved authorizer practices.

Families and students need great public schools that work for them. Quality authorizing responds to community needs, and community-centered authorizing creates opportunities for local families by thoughtfully expanding schools that work to meet the unique needs of every child.

Together with the Charter School Growth Fund, NACSA examined and identified the policies and authorizing practices that support the expansion and replication of high-quality charter schools. We invite you to explore the other resources based on your needs.

For Authorizers:

[*Expanding What Works: Effective Authorizing Practices to Promote Quality Growth*](#)

[*Expanding What Works: Examples of Authorizers Innovating to Promote Quality Growth*](#)



NACSA identified high performers based on knowledge, recommendations, and authorizer data. We conducted interviews and surveyed charter school leaders across the country. They were also asked whether their school or network had gone through an expansion or replication process.

Factors Influencing Growth

Two themes emerged:

1. The biggest factors that influence schools as they decide whether or not to grow are **facilities and funding**. These factors do not traditionally fall into the scope of authorizing policy. However, authorizing could have a role to play within these nontraditional spaces.
2. Unsurprisingly, the policy areas that did emerge as factors in growth decisions were all **related to authorizing**. The lack of policies and practices that differentiate among charter schools based on performance levels proved to significantly impact school decision-making and expansion/replication strategies. Indeed, the lack of differentiated charter application processes for replicating schools and networks was often cited as a key policy barrier.

For the purposes of this resource, expansion and replication have the following definitions:

 **Expansion:** when an existing school expands enrollment by increasing the overall size of its existing student body or adding new grade levels.¹

 **Replication:** when an existing charter school or network opens a new school (either as a new charter or as a new campus under an existing charter).²

¹ In this resource, NACSA classifies the addition of new grades levels as “expansion.” However, the addition of new grade levels involves the education of a new student population and authorizers should conduct a more thorough review of such requests.

² In some states, a new school campus under an existing charter is considered an expansion rather than a replication. In this document, any new school opened by an existing charter school or network (either as a new charter or as a new campus under an existing charter) is considered a replication.

FINDING #1

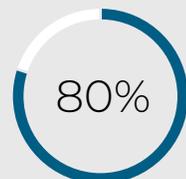


ACCESS TO FACILITIES AND FUNDING ARE ESSENTIAL

Previous research supports these findings. In 2015, [Bellwether](#) conducted a survey of CMOs to learn more about their priorities when considering expansion to new states: 42 percent said the availability of startup funds for expansion was a “must-have.” Bellwether also found that quality and location of facilities mattered the most to operators, along with cost.

Funding and facilities are not often considered authorizing or policy factors. However, some states have incorporated incentives within their charter laws to address these needs:

- Colorado’s charter law states that schools are entitled to all district per-pupil operating revenues for each student they enroll. Additionally, the law requires districts to share local tax funds with charter schools, and a fund has been created to close the funding gap for state-authorized schools. This may explain why the biggest enrollment increases took place in charter and online schools in Colorado in 2017.¹



80% noted **facilities** as a factor when deciding to expand or replicate



47% noted **funding** as a factor when deciding to expand or replicate

“ [Facilities] is very challenging... the biggest challenge, as you will probably hear [from all charter operators]. It’s both hard to source, but also hard to finance.”

¹ <https://co.chalkbeat.org/2018/1/9/21104080/charter-and-online-schools-report-the-largest-increase-in-students-in-colorado>

FINDING #1

ACCESS TO FACILITIES AND FUNDING ARE ESSENTIAL



- In Tennessee, underutilized and vacant properties, by law, have to be made available to charter schools. The law requires any Local Education Agency (LEA) in which one or more charter schools operates to list all vacant properties owned or operated by the LEA. Each LEA's list is then made available to any charter operating or looking to operate in that LEA. Further, the law guarantees charters a per-pupil facilities allowance that annually reflects actual average district capital costs. Correlation does not equal causation, but it is important to note that student enrollment in Shelby County Schools, Tennessee's largest school district, is up slightly and charter schools have been shown to be driving that growth.²

“...our priority is funding equity with the school districts... Our public funding has gone down on a per pupil basis for four straight years. That has made it hard... it's harder to be a good school when you don't have enough money.”

² <https://tn.chalkbeat.org/2020/1/16/21121098/charter-school-growth-drives-enrollment-increase-in-memphis-schools>

FINDING #2



HIGH-FLIERS NEED DIFFERENTIATED EXPANSION AND REPLICATION PROCESSES

NACSA has found that one of the best ways to encourage the growth of high-performing charters schools is to have a clear definition for what qualifies as high-performing. Our interviews with school leaders confirmed this view. Authorizers should also provide opportunities for those high-performing charter schools to grow or replicate more easily. Examples of these opportunities include expedited and more efficient application processes for both expansion and replication, less frequent financial reporting, and less intensive site visits (see [Expanding What Works: Effective Authorizing Practices to Promote Quality Growth](#) for more examples of best practices).

Schools expressed frustration with overly complex and poorly run replication or expansion processes. Some participants shared that the burdensomeness of their authorizer's processes prevented greater charter growth in their sector or community (see [Expanding What Works: Effective Authorizing Practices to Promote Quality Growth](#) for more examples of best practices).



40% stated that their authorizer had a **clear definition** for high performance



Only 13% reported their authorizer providing **any benefits** associated with high performance.

“ I think that charters definitely need a common definition of excellence. If we have that and there are organizations hitting it, it would be helpful and make getting startup funding easier. And it's important that we always show community support, but it's burdensome to produce a 200-page application with the exact same questions as a new charter and to require our board members to answer the same questions in the capacity interview as in an interview for a new charter school... Authorizers should be digging into our data and our work. Then based on that data, we should be allowed to replicate or not. I think the replication process and the compliance requirements need to be streamlined, especially for high performers.”

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS



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mentioned **political environments** as a key factor when deciding to expand or replicate

Politics matter. This finding speaks to the importance of the local ecosystems in which charters operate. Authorizers should strive for processes that are not influenced by politics, and they should operate in a way that is fair for and transparent to all. For example, in 2015, the Oregon Department of Education (ORDOE) was awarded a Charter Schools Program (CSP) grant to, in part, increase the number of high-quality charter schools in Oregon.¹ However, the political climate was tricky as many local districts saw new charter schools as a threat. To combat these challenging political circumstances, ORDOE requested and received a flexibility waiver to provide funds to expand existing high-quality charter schools since that would be an easier political lift within districts.

¹ [Expanding What Works: Examples of Authorizers Innovating to Promote Quality Growth](#)



CONCLUSION

School operators were clear: facilities and funding matter, but so does recognizing excellence and rewarding high-fliers with unobstructed pathways for growth.

For the charter sector to resume its strong rate of growth, authorizers need to act as catalysts, rather than passive recipients and evaluators of proposals. This includes creating ecosystems that promote the expansion and replication of high-performing charter schools—a proven way to increase quality public school opportunities while maintaining quality.

“Politically, there are a number of policies that are set out to **prevent charter schools from expanding** at this moment.”

FOR REFERENCE: APPROACH AND ANALYSIS

Sample

NACSA received input from 15 charter school leaders, representing 10 states:

- California
- Colorado
- Florida
- Georgia
- Idaho
- Massachusetts
- Maryland
- Missouri
- New Jersey
- Washington

Nine represented single-site charters and six represented networks (mostly 3 or fewer schools). Of the single site schools, nearly all had expanded in the past and 22 percent had no plans for further expansion or replication. Click [here](#) to learn more about the authorizer types represented.

Analysis

NACSA staff developed the interview protocols by reviewing previous model charter school laws, along with resources related to expansion and replication to determine what factors were commonly mentioned. Questions were created around these factors.

Staff reviewed each interview and survey response to note any factors participants mentioned as either incentives for growth or barriers to growth.

Factors Seen in Interviews/Surveys

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ease of application | <input type="checkbox"/> Economies of scale |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher certification | <input type="checkbox"/> Philanthropy |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Charter funding | <input type="checkbox"/> Talent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Contract renewal length | <input type="checkbox"/> Definition of high performance |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Facilities | <input type="checkbox"/> School/grade pipeline |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation | <input type="checkbox"/> Community need |

These factors were categorized as policy or non-policy, as well as authorizing or non-authorizing, and defined as:

- **Policy:** any factor that is significantly controlled or influenced by state charter law (e.g. renewal terms)
- **Non-policy:** any factor that is not traditionally controlled or influenced by state charter law (e.g. presence of philanthropy)
- **Authorizing:** any factor that is traditionally part of the purview of a charter authorizer (e.g. application processes, renewal processes)
- **Non-authorizing:** any factor that is not traditionally part of the purview of a charter authorizer (e.g. community politics)

Staff then reviewed the interviews and surveys once again and the coding schema was applied.



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