



How to Communicate Your Authorizing Decisions

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
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Community-Centered Authorizing (CCA) requires new and different ways of listening to and building with communities. This can lead to more and different high-quality public schools that meet the needs of students and families.

Authorizers who do CCA well keep communities informed—through clear, authentic communications—of decisions they make throughout a school’s lifecycle, but particularly at times of high-stakes decisions, like opening, renewal, and/or closure.

Current Landscape

Pick up a newspaper or do a quick Google search and it’s clear: parents and communities want better academic outcomes and experiences for students—especially as we move from the global pandemic into recovering well. According to the National Parents Union, 81% of parents say recent test scores indicate a major problem in classrooms. And a majority of parents want to see innovative approaches to learning and teaching.¹ In another study, 63% of all parents and 78% of Black parents said, “Schools need to focus on rethinking education and coming up with new ways of teaching and learning as a result of COVID-19.”²

Charter schools are demonstrating that they can deliver on exactly what these parents and communities say they want from public education. According to the National Charter School Study III 2023 from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), new schools opened with stronger results than at any time in the past. More than 1,000 schools were identified as “gap-busting” schools, showing educational equity is not just an idea, but a reality for tens of thousands of students.

Despite these successes, some families seem to have a different understanding of the progress being made than those working in and around classrooms. Where is the disconnect? Why don't some families and communities feel the impact of chartering in their communities?

Despite the strong progress made in chartering, too often, communities do not feel a part of the decision-making process nor have clarity on why consequential decisions are made. Communication of authorizing decisions is an opportunity to establish and/or reinforce relationships with communities. After all, what benefit is developing relationships with communities, seeking understanding of their needs and aspirations, and partnering with leaders and organizations, if those very communities are unaware of the outcomes and have had a meaningful opportunity to participate in decision-making? In fact, that demonstrates the opposite of CCA—doing *to* or *for* communities—rather than the intended goal of building *from* and doing *with* communities.



As schooling evolves, so should school accountability—or authorizing. Communities want schools to be accountable for high standards of literacy, numeracy, and other goals that measure student preparedness for their futures. When either schools don't meet those expectations or parents are unaware of how schools are, in fact, meeting them, trust is broken. Authorizers play a part in filling this “trust gap” by being the honest communicators of school quality—both good and bad. One principle of CCA speaks to this: “Acting on the aspirations and needs of local communities will require fresh thinking and action, inclusive of and beyond typical charter schooling and authorizing practices.” This couldn't be more true than in communications about major decisions.

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Communicating results (i.e., application decisions, renewals, etc.) with communities isn't something that authorizing has historically done or done well at-scale. This means many families and residents don't hear from authorizers, or only hear from them once a school is closing its doors. But as authorizers seek to get more proximate to communities⁴ and embrace CCA principles and practices,⁵ authorizers must view and incorporate communities as critical stakeholders at all steps in the process.

To communicate effectively:

- **Know your audience(s).** The key to any communication is to know who is receiving the message; this will shape all aspects of a CCA communications strategy. CCA has a “built in” data source from the planning stage to help authorizers understand their audience: use that data and knowledge to develop the message. That information will shape a differentiated approach to ensure each audience receives what they need. Be careful though: The goal is not to deliver different messages to different audiences, but rather to deliver the same message in a range of ways to different audiences.
- **Use a multimedia approach.** Communities are not monolithic; the communications approach cannot be either. Organizations can fall into the trap of simply sending an email or posting a notice and expecting everyone to see it. Once you've developed your message based on your audience(s), get the message out across multiple channels. Channels can include several categories.
 - **Owned:** These are channels the authorizer doesn't have to ask permission or pay to use. These include emails to participants of a focus group, or emailed, newsletters to key community stakeholders, and social media posts (unpaid). They should be the easiest channels to push out a message and quickest to get to your audience.
 - **Earned:** These channels are usually free to use, but require, “permission,” because they are owned by another organization. These include news outlets, blogs, and podcasts. While earned channels require a bit more effort, they can be effective because the audience typically has some trust already built with the channel's owner, which can serve as an endorsement. If you don't already have these partners, public hearings and/or focus groups⁶ can be a great place to learn who these organizations and leaders are.
 - **Paid:** These channels charge a fee and are usually considered advertisements. Some examples include mailings, promoted/sponsored social media, website banner ads, and outdoor advertising (billboards, bus wraps). Paid channels have a higher barrier to entry and should be saved for large strategic announcements. (Please note: paid communications channels are meant for broad audiences, so they may not be the best tool for communicating directly to communities.)

Build trust using endorsers and ambassadors. Authorizers should use staff and other partners who have relationships to, experiences with, and knowledge of communities, beyond just the planning stage of CCA. And, because community ambassadors have been involved in the authorizing processes and decision-making, they are more likely to understand and effectively communicate key decisions and messages. These staff members and partners have trust with communities that 1) makes it easier to convey an authorizer’s message; and 2) allows them to authentically endorse key decisions. This endorsement can lead to long-term trust between the authorizer and community.

Communicate regularly. Building on this trust, regular and predictable communication with communities is key to CCA. This will help solidify the trust that is essential for future stages of the life cycle and other high-stakes decisions authorizers have to make. Over time, authorizers who communicate and authentically engage regularly with communities will have to rely less and less on partners to build knowledge of a community and for endorsements. Rather, these authorizers will have a vested interest in the communities, allowing them to effectively implement CCA.

Communities care deeply about public education options available to them, and the impact those schools have on children and families. Authorizers, the local stewards of quality public school options, are in a unique position to listen to, learn from, and respond with communities on their needs and aspirations. The authorizers who follow the adage of “communicate early and often” foster and deepen the very relationships on which Community-Centered Authorizing is built.



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