



How to Supplement Your Application Evaluation Rubric

*Additional evaluation criteria to ensure that new
schools meet community aspirations and needs*



This resource supplements NACSA's current [Application Evaluation Criteria](#) guidance. It provides authorizers guidance to update their new school application process and evaluation criteria to more effectively assess the extent to which applicants understand and engage the intended community; address community aspirations and needs; and demonstrate demand sufficient enough to meet enrollment targets—all important elements of a quality application review. In using this resource, authorizers should take care not to lengthen the application by adding more questions or criteria. Review [NACSA's recommendations for rethinking the new school application](#) for more information and ideas.

Public charter schools are uniquely positioned to meet the specific aspirations, needs, and demands of local communities.

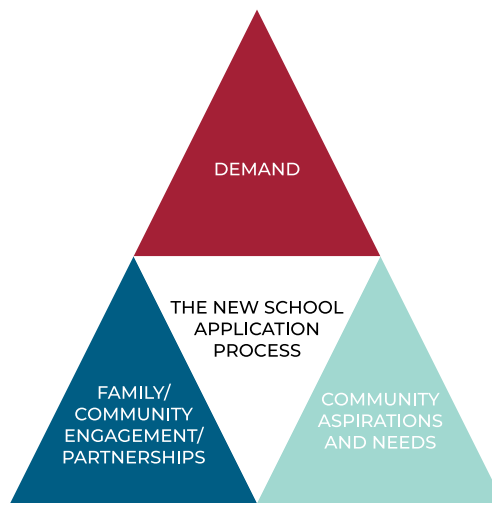
Designing schools *with* communities is an ongoing process that starts at the development and application stage. Then—if the school is approved—collaboration with communities becomes embedded in the fabric of the school because they were involved from the beginning. The school's engagement with families and community is continual and informs the development and implementation of the educational program.

Authorizers set expectations for school applicant teams to invest time and energy to deeply understand the community they seek to serve. By expecting this kind of engagement, authorizers ensure authentic demand exists to support the viability and sustainability school.

In the new school application process, authorizers have an opportunity to thoroughly evaluate whether an applicant has designed a school with the community they seek to serve. In alignment with [*NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*](#), authorizers use rigorous approval criteria. Authorizers can broaden this criteria, using this guidance, to evaluate several characteristics of community aspirations, needs, and demands, as well as how the applicant team has and will continue to engage a diverse group of stakeholders—particularly parents—to inform school operations. **These three areas are not separate or disconnected concepts; they are inherently intertwined, overlapping, and inter-reliant.**

NACSA's vision for community-centered authorizing rests on a commitment to rigorous approval criteria to ensure that applicant teams are only approved if they:

- Clearly identify their community with data reflecting an analysis of demographics, other educational options and school performance, and other data to assess the potential need;
- Provide evidence of their community engagement, showing multiple means used to deeply understand their aspirations, needs, and demand (including how community voices are reflected in the school design and whether that design has achieved positive outcomes in similar communities);
- Identify and describe community partnerships they have nurtured to advance the school's mission;
- Provide evidence of demand for the school they have designed; and
- Provide a plan for ongoing robust family and community engagement.



Community Aspirations and Needs

Community aspirations and needs refers to families' access to quality schools, including new educational opportunities, unique or relevant instructional models, strong student outcomes, and other programmatic aspects of a school that families and communities seek.

School developers and quality authorizers start with an understanding of what existing data says about the needs of its intended community. Well-established authorizers do their due diligence in advance of application review cycles to accumulate data and conduct a community analysis.ⁱ Similarly, a successful school developer defines its community and gathers data on demographics, existing school performance, enrollment trends, other educational options, and community assets.

Authorizers and new school applicants must thoroughly analyze up-to-date performance data of other schools in the community. Other means to determine a community's aspirations and needs take into account safety, school culture, location, education model, and other services that may or may not be provided in existing schools. Even if those things are available, need also involves an assessment of access and quality: Are there waitlists or available spots in schools that students and families want to attend? Do transportation options make it feasible for them to attend? Even if such things are offered, are they high-quality and meet the needs that families are looking for?

In short, authorizers should consider whether a new school will offer a community a strong academic program, as well as something it aspires to and does not already have at a high level of quality—whether that is a safe and affirming environment, a particular educational model, available spots, related program services, or a combination of these.

ⁱ DC Public Charter School Board Sector Planning Supplement (2022) <https://dcpcs.egnyte.com/dl/4hw2ak2AyT>:

Family/Community Engagement/Partnerships

Family/community engagement/partnerships refers to the ways relevant stakeholders and partners are included in the design, development, and implementation of a charter school. Charter school applicants cannot demonstrate responsiveness to families and communities and identify sufficient demand without robust and meaningful engagement with families, community organizations, and other local stakeholders, both in the school development phase, and throughout the life of the school.

Engagement can look different, depending on the community, and should include a variety of approaches. One idea is central: key stakeholders, particularly families, have a voice in the school design and implementation. An authorizer, for example, can require applicant teams to show how a proposed school's model and/or approach has been validated and/or adjusted in response to family and community input. Strong proposals often include specific information regarding how the plan evolved from initial discussions and was again shared back with the community for fine-tuning. Further, partnerships with community-based organizations can strengthen community connection, support meeting enrollment targets, and leverage community assets to help advance the mission of the school once operational.

Check out these examples of how new school applicant groups do or do not build schools with their communities.

- [Meeting Community Aspirations In MN: Community-Centered Charter Schooling In Action](#)
- [Community-Centered Education Isn't New: Lessons Learned From Reviewing A Public Charter School Application For Endazhi-Nitaawiging, Indigenous Education By and For Its Community](#)





Demand

Demand refers to the intention or desire of a sufficient number of students and families to attend a new charter school to meet a school's expressed enrollment goals.

Numerous elements can impact demand for a school. On a macro level, population density, existing public school (or other educational option) capacity, and residential development, among other demographic trends, impact the number of students eligible or anticipated to enroll in any particular school or grade level. Over time, general population and economic development trends, as well as local school capacity changes, can impact student and family demand for additional high-quality school options.

To assess the need for a school, authorizers and applicants use the data analysis and community engagement to review population/demographic studies, community needs assessments, or local district enrollment projections, among other things. Once need is established, applicant teams must demonstrate demand—that enough eligible students will actually enroll in this particular school, should it open.

An authorizer ensures that all applicants demonstrate that they are likely to meet their enrollment targets. Demonstration of demand also reflects the engagement between the school developers and the community and the extent to which the school design responds to families and students.

Showing sufficient demand does not mean they have commitments for every seat at the time of application, but that they provide evidence that they *will* meet enrollment targets upon opening.

Typically, this means applicants conduct interest surveys, host community meetings, garner support from community leaders, develop partnerships with community organizations, collect letters of interest/intent from prospective families, and more, to demonstrate that they are on a path to having enough students enroll if the school opened. Additionally, applicants must have a robust plan for generating demand over time. The possible marketing and recruitment strategies are nearly endless, though they must be appropriate for and relevant to the applicant's identified community. It is critical that authorizers are open to and evaluate a broad range of evidence related to demand, and do not preemptively conclude that demand does not exist because of perceived saturation. Instead, authorizers evaluate the data, evidence, and educational approach aligned to the identified community in assessing demand.



Evidence

Community-centered authorizers review a wide variety of evidence to evaluate new school applications in regards to community aspirations and needs, family/community engagement/partnerships, and demand.

The application narrative offers an important opportunity to provide evidence to the authorizer, such as a description of plans, a discussion of activities to date, or a presentation of data and related analysis.

High-quality narratives connect the dots throughout the application, providing a compelling rationale for creating a new school for the intended community that uses quantitative and qualitative demographic, educational, and other data, aligns to community aspirations and needs, highlights how this school is being developed with the community, and details how this responds to family and student demand.

Many authorizers have identified basic evidence expected from applicants, such as lists of interested community members and families. Community-centered authorizers go beyond this, setting a high expectation that applicants provide evidence demonstrating robust community engagement and demand. Applicants may submit evidence of the impact of community engagement strategies and events such as how families responded to flyers, ads, social media posts, etc. Authorizers should expect and review a range of information provided during the application process, which may include survey data, sign-in lists, notices of intent to enroll, waitlists, or other evidence of family interest, though it is important to consider the nature of this data. For example, if an applicant conducted a survey to gauge demand for their specific program, survey questions should align to that end. “I intend to enroll my child in an arts-focused middle school,” is a clearer indicator of demand than “I believe that the arts in schools are important.”

Evidence of community partnerships is also useful information. Such information can take various forms, including letters or other evidence of general support for a proposed school or educational model and/or evidence of more substantial partnerships through programming, resources, facilities, or other means, that might be included in a formal letter from a community-based organization or a formal memorandum of understanding (MOU).

Authorizers expect an applicant team's understanding of the community to deepen over time. Authorizers often include multiple touchpoints with the applicant in order to see evidence of changes to their understanding, how community input informed the vision and design of the school, and/or how demand for the school has grown (or not). Capacity interviews are one example of how an authorizer may better understand an applicant's deepening engagement with the community. They provide an important opportunity to clarify or verify information submitted in the written application as well as to gather new information the applicant has learned. For example:

- How did community feedback change or validate a specific aspect of the education program or overall school design?
- How has demand changed in the past few months? (i.e., from the point of application submission to the capacity interview).
- Which community engagement activities have been more successful in increasing demand?

Finally, authorizers triangulate information provided by the applicant. Through a comprehensive community analysis, authorizers are equipped with the demographic, capacity, and student outcomes data of the local community and existing school options. Authorizers who have completed their own community analysis can compare it to that of the applicant. They can also directly ask the applicant to reflect on the authorizer's analysis, explaining areas where data or its interpretation differ. Furthermore, authorizers with a well-established approach and relevant capacity may attend community engagement events held by the applicant or otherwise connect directly with families, community members, and partners to gather first-hand evidence and better understand how the application team is engaging with and responding to community aspirations and needs, as well as assessing demand.



Quality Standards

Authorizers can supplement their existing application standards to encompass a thorough review of these community-centered design elements: community aspirations and needs, family/ community engagement/partnerships, and demand.

Below are the quality standards an applicant demonstrates for approval. (These are not questions or application prompts to which an applicant must respond; an authorizer may decide to include such questions or prompts in an RFP or new school application guidance.)

A quality authorizer provides applicants (and application reviewers) with clear evaluation standards or rubrics that set the standard for quality and expectations for approval. When establishing a standard of quality, authorizers should be clear about what constitutes “meeting the standard” or a “strong response.” For example, one type of engagement activity such as a town hall might be extremely meaningful in one community, but not as widely used in another. Authorizers must use their professional judgment to ensure applicants move beyond simply completing tasks and prioritize the quality of the activities and evidence needed for their context.

Standard	Description
A.1- Definition of Community	<p>The application contains:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear definition of the community the school seeks to serve (NACSA defines community as: a group of individuals—families, students, educators, leaders—who find commonality in shared experiences). The community may be defined by geographic radius, target neighborhood, or a particular student population. • A demographic analysis of the identified community.
A.2- Community Participants	<p>The application identifies community stakeholders including families, organizations, and other community members, whom the application team engaged to learn of the aspirations and needs of the community and seek input into the design of the proposed school.</p>
A.3- Community Engagement Strategies	<p>The application provides evidence of ongoing community engagement approaches and strategies used by the application team to learn about the community, understand its unique needs and assets, and navigate multiple stakeholders' thoughts on educational programs, school and community culture, school supports, after school programs, etc.; evidence includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple and varied engagement opportunities and strategies (e.g., radio, written materials, public meeting/hearing, direct outreach, community activities, etc.) relevant for the intended community. • An explanation of how access to opportunities were equitable based on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - times - locations - community diversity - inclusion of under-resourced students and families, including students with disabilities and English Learners - languages
B.1- Academic/ Programmatic/Access/ Demographic Need	<p>The application includes evidence of data defining need from one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Academic</u>: academic performance of comparative schools within the community demonstrates low performance reflecting a need for other high-quality options (data comes from multiple sources and includes subgroup data) • <u>Programmatic</u>: identifies a need for more/different education options than currently exist for the community including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - grade levels, - instructional models (responsive to the community), and/or - related programmatic and support offerings • <u>Access</u>: The application includes data showing an insufficient number of seats in existing schools that deliver strong academic outcomes and/or the proposed educational programming (e.g., full enrollment, existing waitlists, lack of programming offerings) • <u>Demographic</u>: The application includes demographic projections and analysis for the identified community and relevant grade levels.

Standard	Description
B.2- Community Need	The application reflects data from community engagement and input opportunities that shows the inclusion in the school design, analysis, and understanding of the values, aspirations, and needs of the community.
C.1- Enrollment Plans	The application includes a comprehensive description of the school's projected student enrollment and anticipated student demographics, aligned with the proposed community the applicant has defined (consistent with the data).
C.2- Program Plans	<p>The application:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes a vision, mission, design, and educational program of the proposed school that reflects the data, and values, aspirations, and needs of the community Identifies how, where, and why (the rationale for) the applicant team has adjusted and/or validated school plans based on the community's input and feedback.
C.3- Partnership Plans	<p>The application includes partnerships planned with individuals or organizations from the community or those that have long served the community; the plans are aligned with the school's vision and mission; each plan involves services, resources, programs, volunteers, space, etc. that the school will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <u>Provide to</u> community organizations, individuals, educational institutions, and/or businesses; or <u>Receive from</u> community organizations, individuals, educational institutions, and/or businesses <p>Each partnership in the application includes a draft MOU, contract, letter of intent, or other verifiable way of substantiating the nature of the partnership.</p>
C.4- Feedback Plans	The application includes the school's plan for a variety of ways to collect, solicit, and utilize family and community input and feedback on school programs and outcomes once operational.
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Standard	Description
D.1- Demand	<p>The application includes evidence of community demand for the proposed school at a level sufficient to meet projected enrollment targets for Year 1 through full enrollment, which includes some or all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • objective market research; • surveys or other measures of local demand; • attendance sheets at and/or recordings of virtual or in-person information meetings; • statements of interest on social media platforms; • subscribers to listservs and/or followers on social media accounts • relationships with potential feeder programs; • intent-to-enroll forms or similar commitments by families; • expected conversion rates of commitments to actual enrollment; • personalized letters of support from parents, specifying if letters are from a parent/ guardian of age-eligible child(ren); • waitlist data at nearby schools or those with similar programs; and • other quantitative and qualitative evidence



Conclusion

Quality authorizers use multiple data points to evaluate how a proposed school meets and reflects community aspirations, need, and demand, and demonstrates engagement with a diverse group of stakeholders—particularly parents—to inform school design and operations. No one data point should drive an authorizer’s conclusions or decisions. Instead an authorizer looks at the evidence, evaluates it against rigorous approval criteria, and uses professional judgment.

This guide supports that process at the application stage, but assessing these areas does not end at this stage. If approved, an applicant will continue to engage its community and demonstrate increasing demand so it can ultimately open its doors and serve students consistent with its mission. An authorizer uses its ready-to-open processes from application approval through opening to ensure schools continue to do this.