



Lifting All Boats: Applying Authorizing Principles Across Education

nacsa
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

INTRODUCTION

What if the most consequential innovation in charter schooling isn't about school practices? What if it's about how schools are overseen, granted autonomy, and held accountable? What if charter school authorizing helps all boats rise in education by improving student outcomes across education systems?

Ensuring all schools are high quality and overseen well—in a way that creates public confidence and maximizes educators' time on teaching and learning—isn't just a charter school goal. These modern approaches to performance management should be shared commitments across education.

Authorizing has been refining this work for decades. There is an opportunity for that work to help solve significant challenges more broadly in the education sector.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has been the national leader in advancing and strengthening the ideas and practices of authorizing so students and communities—especially those who are historically under-resourced—thrive. For more than two decades, NACSA has identified and codified the key principles and best practices of authorizing and shared these with the field. This has strengthened school oversight, improved performance management, and heightened community responsiveness.

At its inception, one key idea of the charter school model (reflected in many state laws) was the innovation that could positively influence the rest of public education. Today, many leaders point to charter schools as among the most effective school improvement strategies; authorizing is at the heart of that success. Authorizing, therefore, now has a unique opportunity to seed and spur more innovation, share learnings with the broader education arena, and maintain a mutual exchange of ideas that work.

This report describes how the principles and practices of authorizing can help education leaders solve key problems, and highlights NACSA's expertise to help accomplish this. The plan is to share what authorizing has learned about creating innovative, community-responsive schools that meet the needs of students and families, while simultaneously upholding rigorous accountability for academic, financial, and organizational performance.

All schools, not just charter schools, should prioritize building and sustaining opportunities aligned to community needs: authorizing has learned a great deal that it now can begin to share more broadly.

APPLYING AUTHORIZING PRINCIPLES MORE BROADLY

In 2022, NACSA thoroughly reviewed its historical work to identify the principles of quality authorizing with the greatest potential for broader applicability beyond the charter school sector. NACSA staff and advisors looked at potential impact beyond charter schooling, adoption viability, and whether there were existing examples of broader implementation.

After a series of internal and external incubation sessions, NACSA identified four key principles of authorizing with significant potential for broader applicability.

1. Performance-Based Contracting



THE CHALLENGE

School leaders and educators need autonomy to innovate and adapt to meet the unique and changing needs of their communities. At the same time, communities should be assured that schools are held to high standards in meeting these needs, academic or otherwise. A number of school districts have attempted to introduce school-level autonomy and decision making through policies such as [Innovation Zones](#) and [School-Site Based Budgeting](#), but with limited impact.





AUTHORIZING'S APPROACH

The performance-based contract is the agreement that sets the foundation for an oversight relationship focused on outputs and outcomes, rather than inputs. It establishes the academic, financial, and organizational standards to which the school will be held accountable, adapted to the specific and unique goals and mission of the school, while simultaneously guaranteeing the school autonomy over critical aspects of its operations and academics. The performance-based contract is arguably the key innovation of the charter school model.



NACSA'S EXPERTISE

As the very foundation of the charter school model, performance-based contracting is essential to quality authorizing. NACSA's [*Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*](#) state that "a quality authorizer executes contracts with charter schools that articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, funding, administration and oversight, outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms." The contract establishes the legally binding agreement and terms under which the school autonomously operates and will be held accountable. NACSA has resources and expertise to ensure solid implementation, including a model contract, and training and consultation for professionals new to this work.

2. Differentiated Oversight



THE CHALLENGE

Schools and school systems must be held to high standards for core academic measures. But as schools evolve to meet the diverse needs of students, families, and communities, measures of accountability and definitions of school success are evolving as well. Moreover, school oversight and support are time- and resource-intensive. School oversight systems must be rigorous yet nimble, and objective yet flexible, to not only accurately evaluate school performance, but to also efficiently allocate time and resources to those schools based on their need for support.



AUTHORIZING'S APPROACH

The charter school model has shown that there is no “one best way” to educate students, nor is there one way to evaluate a school. Authorizers have established—and continue to evolve—practices for providing flexible, yet rigorous oversight that simultaneously accommodates different instructional approaches and community needs. Charter oversight models also enable differentiation in how to address underperforming schools, while maintaining autonomy. Even before receiving an application, an authorizer must have a process in place that enables new, innovative school ideas to be evaluated fairly. Once approved, authorizers utilize performance frameworks that hold schools to rigorous, objective measures while accommodating and considering the unique aspects of the school’s model and approach.



NACSA'S EXPERTISE

NACSA has resources, guidance, and professional development opportunities to help balance the competing needs of accountability and innovation, while prioritizing community needs. Recently, NACSA significantly revised its [Guide to Performance Frameworks](#), as well as published new resources like the [Multiple Measures](#) toolkit. More than any one proven resource or practice, what NACSA and the authorizing field have developed is a mindset and process of continuous evolution and adjustment.

3. Evaluating Need & Community Demand



THE CHALLENGE

Communities and families have bold aspirations for their children and are demanding access to quality schools, including new educational opportunities, relevant instructional models, and strong student outcomes. To meet these demands, school leaders must listen, and respond, to families and communities in ways that are clear and authentic: the evolution of education cannot happen to communities but must occur with communities.



AUTHORIZING'S APPROACH

Authorizers, in approving and overseeing schools, play a vital role in evaluating need and demand for certain school models in their communities. To assess need and demand for a school, authorizers use a range of information including data analysis, community engagement, quality of existing educational options, population/demographic studies, community needs assessments, or enrollment projections, among other things to ensure new educational opportunities meet community aspirations and will have a sufficient number of students should it open. The authorizing field has continued to evolve to ensure that, even after approved and in operation, schools remain responsive to and reflective of the communities they serve.



NACSA'S EXPERTISE

NACSA's resources and guidance—which we are continually updating in response to communities—includes frameworks for assessing community need and demand. These tools have been critical to ensuring authorizers appropriately consider the needs and demands of their specific communities throughout the life cycle of the school. NACSA also works with authorizers to embed community responsiveness and engagement in all aspects of their work. This priority is reflected in resources like the [Guide to Performance Frameworks](#), [Rethinking the New School Application](#), and NACSA's [New Schools with Communities](#) Guide.

4. Assessing Capacity & Program Viability



THE CHALLENGE

While families and communities are rightly demanding that schools and school systems evolve, new educational options—whether it’s a new school, a new teaching and learning model, or a new approach—must be developed in a sustainable way that protects the public’s interest and investment. Simply having a new instructional idea or schooling approach is not sufficient to dedicate public trust and resources; new ideas must be viable. The individuals proposing the idea must also have the capacity and capability to execute.



AUTHORIZING’S APPROACH

Assessing the viability of a new school proposal, from the financial plan to the leadership and governance capacity of the founding team, is a vital practice of quality authorizing. During the new school application process, authorizers use the written application and in-person capacity interviews to evaluate viability, relying on the expertise of in-house staff or external consultants. A quality authorizer maintains high standards for schools in their portfolio, not only for academic outcomes, but also for financial and organizational soundness.



NACSA’S EXPERTISE

Executing proper financial and organizational oversight requires specific professional expertise. NACSA has been the leader, producing toolkits and resources, like the [Guide to Performance Frameworks](#) and capacity interview guidance. NACSA also facilitates professional development opportunities and learning cohorts to build the institutional expertise and capacity required for proper oversight of program sustainability and viability. This expertise can be applied not just to new schools, but to new school models, academic programs, and approaches to instruction.

THE OPPORTUNITY OF AUTHORIZING

The charter school model is seen, by advocates and policymakers alike, as fulfilling a broad range of goals, demonstrated by the [many purposes](#) set forth in charter school laws across the country. Arguably, the charter sector has made remarkable strides towards many of these goals, such as raising student academic achievement, especially for historically underserved populations and communities; establishing and replicating innovative models; creating new pathways and opportunities for instructional leaders; and expanding the number and quality of educational options available to families.

Now, the time has come for the innovation of authorizing to help solve problems beyond charter schooling. There are examples of charter schools and other public schools effectively collaborating, and anecdotal evidence of idea sharing: now is the natural juncture to support efforts at larger scale adoption. NACSA's Broadening Commitments Task Force, composed of stakeholders from charter school authorizing, broader district and state education governance, and advocacy and research, is trying to better understand the potential for success by analyzing case studies of districts and states that are applying principles and practices of authorizing to solve significant problems.

From the Task Force's work to-date, one lesson stands out: the four principles above are deeply interdependent. Attempts to apply the principles of authorizing in broader education contexts have faltered, in many cases, because one principle is being implemented in isolation. For example, developing new academic programs to meet community need and demand necessarily requires evaluating the capacity and viability of such programs: there is little benefit to creating new programs that are bound to fail once operational.



Authorizers are uniquely skilled and positioned to apply these interdependent principles and partner with others to do the same. The authorizing field, with NACSA's leadership, has developed not only the tools and resources, like performance frameworks, model charter school applications, and capacity interview protocols, but also the required professional judgment and expertise to navigate their implementation. Authorizers are also ideally positioned, either directly within (in districts or state education agencies), or closely interconnected with, broader education governance structures.

Over the coming months and years, NACSA will explore promising opportunities and confront challenges of more widespread adoption and/or adaptation of the key lessons of authorizing. Authorizing has a lot to both teach and learn about how to solve problems and grow high-quality educational opportunities that benefit the millions of students still needing an excellent school. We are ready to collaborate with other education leaders to share the best ideas and move thought into action.