



# Authorizing Nontraditional Charter Schools: A Toolkit for Authorizers

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# Foreword

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At the outset of this work, we hypothesized that charter school oversight structures made it difficult for charter schools with nontraditional models to open, operate, and flourish. We worried that the trend toward increasingly standardized authorizing practices would stymie the diversity of models in the charter sector and limit families' choices. Over the past year, we have sought to understand whether these hypotheses were true and what could be done. Of course, the world looks very different today than it did when we commenced this work.

Before the pandemic, the phrase “nontraditional school models” may have brought to mind Montessori schools, competency-based education, and dual-language programs. Today, the phrase is more likely to bring to mind virtual instruction, hybrid homeschooling, and learning pods. Moreover, few schools today are operating a “traditional” model. The pandemic is forcing educators, policymakers, and funders to fundamentally rethink how we sustain student learning in the midst of unprecedented disruption.

The lessons and recommendations surfaced in our research are more salient than ever and will help authorizers, school leaders, and others navigate another school year in the midst of a pandemic. In addition to the resources we initially created as part of our work on nontraditional schools, we developed a [complementary toolkit](#) that translates our findings into concrete guidance for school leaders and authorizers in the current moment.

In the short term, we hope this toolkit helps school leaders and authorizers collaborate on their approaches to sustaining learning over the coming weeks and months. And in the long term, we hope this collection of resources will inform how schools, authorizers, and others balance autonomy and accountability in service of creating a diversity of high-quality options for students and families.

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## Introduction

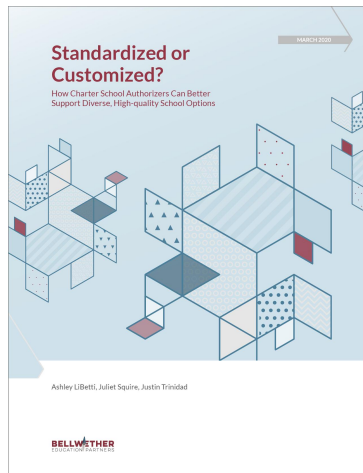
Strategies & Considerations for Improving Capacity

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Metrics

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Communication

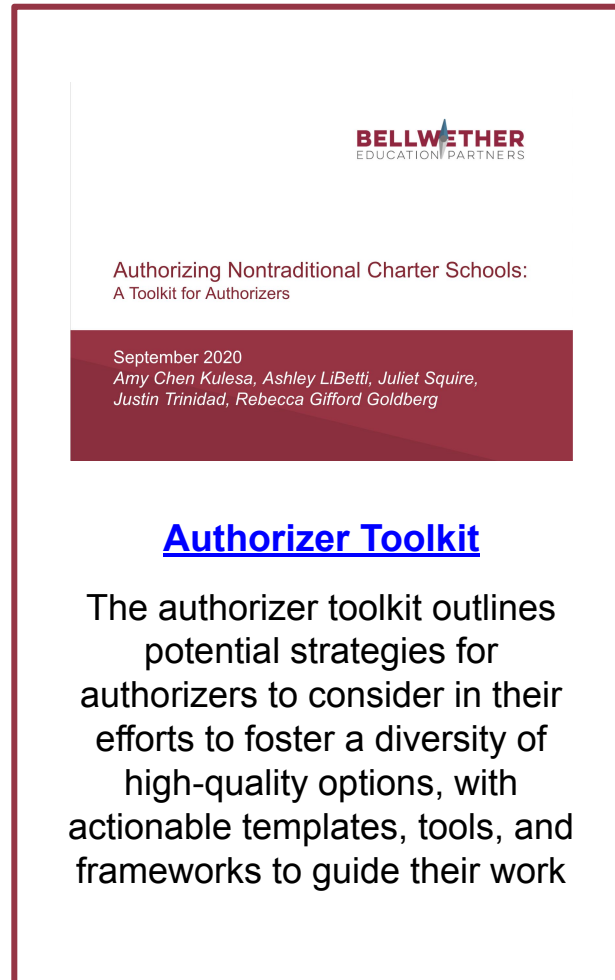
# This toolkit for authorizers is accompanied by a policy report and a toolkit for school leaders

## *This document*



### Policy Report

The policy report provides an analysis and detailed findings about the challenges and opportunities of authorizing nontraditional charter schools, with recommendations for authorizers, school leaders, funders, and policymakers



### Authorizer Toolkit

The authorizer toolkit outlines potential strategies for authorizers to consider in their efforts to foster a diversity of high-quality options, with actionable templates, tools, and frameworks to guide their work



### School Leader Toolkit

The school leader toolkit outlines potential strategies for the leaders of nontraditional schools to use when they work with authorizers, including actionable templates, tools, and frameworks

# Introduction

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The ability to foster a diverse set of schools is an essential value proposition of the charter sector. The one-size-fits-all approach has proven to have limited utility, and the charter sector is well-positioned to foster a diversity of options that meet a variety of student needs; also, in a country as large as ours, the charter sector can accommodate a plurality of family preferences about the education they want for their children. Charter school authorizers, meanwhile, have a mandate to ensure school quality, and their standard measures of school quality can often be in tension with fostering school model diversity.

**Authorizers and school leaders must work together to ensure schools are accountable for strong outcomes but not stymied from implementing nontraditional models.**

In the accompanying [policy report](#), we identify authorizing practices that can disadvantage schools with nontraditional models and may artificially limit their ability to open and expand. In the toolkit that follows, we provide authorizers with a set of considerations, options, and tools to guide how they work with school leaders to address these challenges and ensure their practices foster both the quality and diversity of charter school options. We provide parallel recommendations for school leaders in a [separate toolkit](#). Our goal is to shed light on the importance of authorizing nontraditional charter schools and how the challenges of authorizing nontraditional schools manifest in practice, as well as to provide action steps for authorizers and school leaders who are able and eager to lead the field on these complex issues.

Importantly, it is not our intent to provide an exhaustive list of all the scenarios that nontraditional schools and authorizers may face, nor to propose a “right” answer. Each authorizer must consider the approach that makes the most sense given their constraints and local contexts. Rather, we hope this toolkit:

- **Informs authorizers about the challenges and opportunities of nontraditional schools**
- **Illustrates options authorizers may consider for their approach to nontraditional schools**
- **Shares useful frameworks for considering the benefits and trade-offs of these options**

# Approach and methods (1 of 2): How do we define “nontraditional” charter schools?

**There are a wide variety of school models.** We began our analysis with more than a dozen school models recently identified and defined by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA):

Diverse by design	Classical	“No excuses”	Vocational	Alternative/credit recovery	Arts
Special education	Inquiry-based	Early college	Policy	Gifted	STEM
International/foreign language	Blended/hybrid	Military	Virtual	Single sex	

**A subset of models provides particularly useful illustrations.** For clarity and consistency, we focus on three models that often present challenges for authorizers; we exclude other models entirely.

## **We focus on:**

- **Inquiry-based schools:** Revolve curriculum and practices around students “learning by doing” (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Expeditionary Learning models)
- **Dual language immersion:** Provide instruction in English and a target second language across subjects as a central component of their mission
- **Competency-based schools:** Provide students flexibility in how they demonstrate mastery of a particular skill or subject, allowing them to advance their learning independent of time spent on a subject

## **We exclude:**

- **Schools designed to serve specific student populations,** such as students with autism, overage and under-credited students, or students in foster care. These schools also experience misalignment with standard authorizing practices, but merit a separate, thorough analysis

Though identified within this tailored analysis, the **opportunities and recommendations apply to many other nontraditional models**, including innovative models not yet conceived.

# Approach and methods (2 of 2): How we identified challenges and strategies for authorizing nontraditional charter schools

## How did we identify charter schools' challenges with authorizing?

To identify and understand how standard authorizing practices can create pain points for nontraditional charter schools, we reached out to our networks and solicited input from school leaders themselves.

Ultimately, **more than two dozen leaders of nontraditional schools shared specific examples of these challenges** — as well as some of the ways in which they have been able to navigate them.

We pressure-tested these challenges with staff from eight different authorizers and nine veterans of the charter sector.

## How did we surface potential approaches for authorizers?

We identified four authorizers from across the country who have wrestled with whether and how to adapt their practices to foster more nontraditional charter schools. We reviewed their data, analyzed key documentation, and interviewed their staff.



Colorado Charter School Institute



State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia



District of Columbia Public Charter School Board



The State University of New York Charter Schools Institute




# Current situation: Nontraditional schools and authorizers face challenges throughout the authorizing process

Lever	Challenges for authorizers
Application, approval, and chartering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Authorizers lack familiarity with the model, <b>requiring school leaders to make a stronger case</b> for their school than would otherwise be necessary and/or reducing likelihood of approval</li><li>• Authorizers have standard performance <b>metrics that can conflict</b> with schools' instructional model</li><li>• Authorizers have standard performance <b>metrics that do not fully capture</b> schools' distinct value</li><li>• Authorizers allow schools to write additional metrics, but <b>schools lack the expertise</b> to do this well</li></ul>
Monitoring reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Authorizers use standard metrics that <b>do not accurately reflect schools' performance</b></li><li>• Authorizers use metrics that <b>incentivize schools to adopt practices in conflict with their model</b></li></ul>
High-stakes reviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Authorizers use standard performance metrics that are more likely to put nontraditional schools <b>on the cusp between renewal and non-renewal</b></li><li>• Authorizers use standard rubrics for site visits and classroom observations, which may be <b>misaligned with schools' instructional approach</b></li><li>• Authorizers have set intervals for schools' first high-stakes reviews that may negatively affect their performance, as <b>nontraditional program designs may take more time to fully launch</b></li></ul>
Model expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Authorizers make expansion decisions based on past performance on standard metrics, which may <b>disadvantage schools in the expansion process</b></li><li>• Authorizers lack familiarity with schools and require them to <b>make a stronger case for expansion</b></li></ul>
Soft levers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Authorizers do not understand the model, or why performance looks different from other schools, and may <b>unnecessarily flag emerging concerns</b>, with downstream impact on schools' reputation</li><li>• Authorizers may <b>miss opportunities to highlight successes</b> of the schools in their portfolio</li></ul>

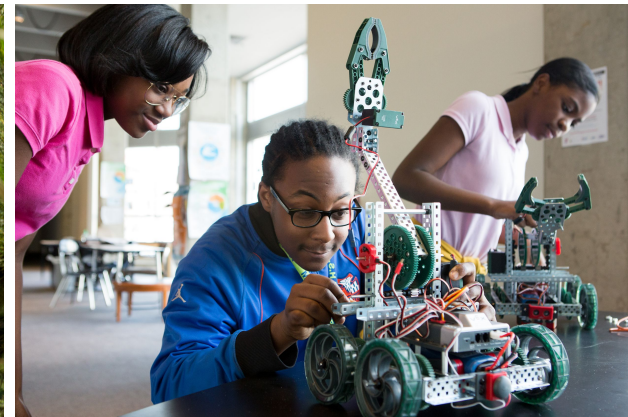
Individual challenges may seem small, but they accumulate. Ultimately, they limit the diversity of models available to students and families.



# Challenges & strategies: Authorizers can advance their work with nontraditional charter schools in three ways

	Challenge	Strategies for Authorizers	Resources & Tools
Capacity	Limitations in knowledge, expertise, time, and resources constrain how authorizers tailor their approach to nontraditional schools	Be aware and build knowledge of specific models by increasing access to data, building expertise to use data effectively, and leveraging external partners	<b>For each challenge, the toolkit provides:</b>  <b>Description</b> of challenges and strategies, from the perspective of the authorizer
Metrics	Authorizers' performance metrics may be in conflict with or may not capture a nontraditional school model's value proposition	Develop or improve upon performance metrics that can accommodate a range of school models while maintaining a high bar of excellence; complement metrics with professional judgment	 <b>Tools</b> , including resources, frameworks, and considerations to support decision-making and to mitigate challenges
Communication	Key stakeholders, including school leaders, authorizing boards, families, and the broader public, may be unfamiliar with nontraditional school models or how the authorizer approaches them	Build trust and ongoing communication with school leaders, board members, parents, and other stakeholders to proactively convey value and explain approach	 <b>Case studies</b> , with sample approaches of how some authorizers are implementing strategies to address challenges

# Intended outcomes: Authorizers have the opportunity to foster a diversity of high-quality schools



Authorizers have the opportunity and responsibility to ensure that **all students can flourish**, that **diverse school models are equally available to all families**, and that all schools are held accountable for providing a **high-quality education**. Authorizers must navigate the tension between **maintaining consistent standards** and **fostering diverse models**. This toolkit seeks to encourage and inform that work, and we offer recommendations for how authorizers and other stakeholders can work to find the **optimal balance**. Ultimately, this toolkit aims to support a charter sector in which more **families have access to a diversity of high-quality options**.

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# Authorizers can build their capacity to foster high-quality, nontraditional charter schools

## Capacity: Description

### Limitations in knowledge, expertise, time, and resources:

Authorizers may **not recognize or understand the value of nontraditional schools**, or they may **lack expertise** in nontraditional schools' models. They may not be aware of how the school's distinct model could affect the **school's performance against standard metrics**, and they may not have the **additional capacity required** to tailor their approach for nontraditional schools.

### This can have at least five consequences:

1. Authorizers may **discourage nontraditional schools from applying (or at least *not encourage them to apply*)** for a charter in the first place
2. Authorizers may be less **likely to approve a charter** for a model they don't understand
3. Authorizers may **penalize or non-renew schools** that are higher quality than is reflected on standard performance metrics or on other inputs considered in high-stakes reviews
4. Authorizers may **miss opportunities to encourage the growth** of high-quality schools
5. Authorizers may **miss opportunities to elevate the excellence** of nontraditional schools to stakeholders, including policymakers, communities, and families

# There are several strategies for how authorizers can build their capacity

## Capacity: Tools

### To build their capacity, authorizers can:

- ① Build their **awareness** of nontraditional school models and the potential challenges they may experience in the authorizing process
- ② **Build capacity** and expertise of authorizing staff
- ③ **Inform the authorizing board** of the staff's approach
- ④ Leverage expertise from **partnerships** and national associations

# ① Build awareness: Authorizers can invest in their own knowledge of challenges specific to nontraditional models

## Capacity: Tools

Authorizers can **familiarize themselves** with the challenges experienced by some of the **more common** nontraditional models

### Models Example Challenges for More Common Nontraditional Models

#### Dual Language Models

- **Pacing of achievement:** Since this model emphasizes language instruction in multiple subject areas in a target second language, students' proficiency rates may be lower on standardized tests conducted in English, especially in elementary grades
- **Achievement in other languages:** Schools may not be rewarded for achieving their goals of language proficiency in the target second language

#### Inquiry-Based Models

- **Multigrade classrooms:** For multigrade classrooms, schools may have varying numbers of students in actual grade levels. Individual grade enrollment may not reflect overall demand, or outcome data may not reflect overall performance
- **Alignment with rubrics:** Observation rubrics that reward teacher-student interactions are in tension with instructional components that encourage uninterrupted student-directed learning
- **Technology proficiency:** Schools that actively avoid technology in the classroom may face a challenge on state assessments that are administered on computers, regardless of students' knowledge/proficiency

#### Competency-Based Models

- **Seat-time requirements:** State and authorizer requirements on hours of exposure to a subject or length of time in a class conflicts with models that measure students' ability to master a topic in ways independent of time or duration
- **Learning progression:** The sequence of instruction is different from other models, and therefore students may not learn the same content, in the same sequence, as is measured by standardized assessments

# ① **Build awareness:** Authorizers can ask questions to understand the differentiating features of a school model

## Capacity: Tools

Authorizers can build awareness by asking questions that apply to all school models

### Questions to ask

- ? Is this school model in demand from families? How do you know? Do other schools have this model?
- ? What are the distinguishing characteristics of the model? How do they support student success?
- ? Do you expect students in this model would achieve proficiency at a different pace than others? Why?
- ? If students are expected to achieve proficiency over a longer timeline, what is that timeline?
- ? Do you anticipate that students will learn content in a sequence different from that on state tests? Why?
- ? How do you measure student growth internally, to inform continuous improvement?
- ? Does the school model rely on a particular style of pedagogy? If so, what should we look for when observing student-teacher classroom interactions?

### Who to ask

**Experts in a particular school model**, through presentations and consultations with authorizer staff and board

**School leaders**, during authorizing interviews, informal meetings, and school site visits

**Other authorizers** who oversee schools with similar models

**Partners** who support the high-quality implementation of school models

## ② **Build capacity:** To build capacity, authorizers can contract, hire, or develop additional expertise

### Capacity: Tools

#### **Authorizers can consider investing in the following roles:**

1. A **measurement and evaluation expert** can work with nontraditional schools to develop metrics that are meaningful, valid, and attainable indicators of school model success
2. A **data analyst** can conduct sophisticated analyses and execute different data needs
3. **Experts** who are knowledgeable in specific school model(s) can support the authorizer's review/assessment of nontraditional school quality
4. A **liaison** can ensure strong communication with the authorizer's board, as well as families, the community, and other key stakeholders

The above roles can be hired internally, contracted externally, or developed among existing staff, depending on need and the availability of resources

If an authorizer does **not** have the resources for the above investments, it could partner with another authorizer that does — either to augment its own capacity or to support nontraditional schools to transfer to another authorizer\*

\*Authorizers that transfer schools to other authorizers must be mindful of the potential that "authorizer shopping" dilutes accountability. See NACSA, "[Ending Authorizer Shopping](#)," 2019.



### 3 Inform the board: Authorizer staff can build buy-in and engagement of the authorizing board

#### Capacity: Tools

By educating and informing their board about nontraditional schools, authorizer staff can build buy-in and alignment for their approach

#### Objective of Authorizer Staff

#### Strategies

Educate board members about nontraditional school models

- **Describe differences** between nontraditional school models
- **Quantify demand** for nontraditional schools, using waitlist data, surveys of local families, or community meetings
- **Arrange site visits** to nontraditional schools (within or outside of the jurisdiction) so board can observe different models in action

Report to board members about approach to overseeing nontraditional school performance

- **Document** different types of nontraditional schools and their distinguishing characteristics and inform board about their performance (e.g., include model information in annual report)
- **Describe approach and rationale** for overseeing nontraditional schools to ensure board understanding and alignment
- **Present process for developing additional metrics**, so board understands what metrics do/do not mean, especially for accountability

Deepen knowledge of board members and/or respond to board member concerns

- **Arrange for school model experts** to speak/consult with the board
- **Consider adding a board member** with expertise in the most common/in-demand nontraditional school models

Authorizer staff should adapt these strategies depending on the role and level of involvement of their board, which can vary considerably

## ④ Partnerships: Authorizers can leverage organizations and associations for needed expertise

### Capacity: Tools

By leveraging partnerships and other existing resources regarding nontraditional school models, authorizers can avoid reinventing the wheel and minimize the need for increasing internal capacity

#### Local Organizations

- Regional charter networks that connect and support a range of charter schools (e.g., [California Charter Schools Association](#), [Northeast Charter Schools Network](#))
- Intermediary support organizations, funders, nonprofits, and thought leaders that influence local education (e.g., [New Schools for New Orleans](#), [Education Forward DC](#))

#### National Organizations

- National networks of charter school authorizers and/or school leaders (e.g., [National Association of Charter School Authorizers](#), [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#))
- National organizations dedicated to supporting high-quality implementation of nontraditional models
  - Inquiry-based schools: [American Montessori Society](#), [Association Montessori International/USA](#), [National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector](#), [EL Education](#)
  - Dual language immersion/bilingual schools: [Association of Two-Way & Dual Language Education](#); [DC Language Immersion Project](#)
  - Competency-based schools: [Clayton Christensen Institute](#), [The Learning Accelerator](#)

#### Researchers, Peers, & Experts

- Other authorizers of nontraditional schools that can share and disseminate best practices, such as the SUNY Charter School Institute's Active Ingredients pilot
- Measurement and evaluation experts that can create or improve metrics
- State or local universities that provide data/evaluation expertise

# Authorizers have implemented various strategies to build their capacity, knowledge, and expertise

## Capacity: Case Studies

### Authorizer

### Example



When a nontraditional school applies for a charter, **PCSB supplements its review team with an expert in that area.** Examples include:

- Hiring a language specialist to evaluate a dual language immersion school
- Hiring a Montessori expert to review applications for Montessori schools



To ensure robust and comprehensive data collection of multiple measures, **SCSC of Georgia established strategic partnerships** with the Georgia Department of Education and Georgia State University for data and analytics. Collaboration enables:

- Calculation of metrics that control for student groups (e.g., economically disadvantaged)
- Analyses of student-level data that control for student characteristics (e.g., date of enrollment, learning disabilities)



**Colorado CSI established an Alternative Education Campuses\* Task Force** to provide input on accountability issues, with a particular focus on optional measures. More than 25 members of the task force include participants from:

- Colorado Department of Education
- Colorado League of Charter Schools
- University of Colorado
- Colorado Charter School Institute
- School leaders, board members, and other education representatives

\* Alternative Education Campuses are focused on alternative student populations, not nontraditional school models. However, learnings and strategies can apply to nontraditional schools. Source: Colorado Charter School Institute, "[Establishing Optional Measures](#)," spring 2018.

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Strategies & Considerations for **Improving Metrics**

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# Authorizers' standard performance metrics can be imperfect or incomplete measures of nontraditional schools' quality

## Metrics: Description

### Imperfect or incomplete performance metrics:

When authorizers use standard performance metrics to assess school quality, those measures may **conflict with a school's instructional model**. In some cases, standard performance metrics may **not accurately reflect the performance** of nontraditional schools. In others, they may **not effectively capture the distinct value** of a nontraditional school model, or how those features meet distinct student needs.

### This can have at least five consequences:

1. Authorizers' standard performance metrics can incentivize nontraditional schools to **adopt practices in conflict with their model**, in order to perform better
2. When standard performance metrics do not accurately reflect nontraditional school performance, they are more likely to be **on the cusp of renewal or non-renewal**
3. Performance metrics that do not capture nontraditional schools' key features may **prevent authorizers from celebrating a school's high quality** or learning from school features that meet distinct student needs
4. Nontraditional schools that perform marginally worse on performance metrics may be **less likely to receive approval for expansion**
5. If the community perceives a school as high quality, but it underperforms against standard metrics, it could **undermine trust in the accountability system** overall

# Authorizers can choose whether and how to adapt their standard performance metrics for nontraditional schools

## Metrics: Tools

### Standard Performance Metrics

Authorizers (ideally) outline a school's performance metrics in the charter contract, and use those metrics to evaluate school quality. Many authorizers have standard metrics they use for all schools in their portfolios, which often include:

- Growth/proficiency on state tests
- Indicators of college and career readiness
- Student attendance and reenrollment rates
- Optional mission-specific metrics (rarely used effectively)

**However, these standard metrics can create challenges for nontraditional schools**  
(see slide 13)

To address challenges nontraditional schools experience with standard performance metrics, authorizers have three options

### 1 No Change to Standard Metrics

Authorizer holds schools accountable for meeting standard metrics (often a summary calculation based on a weighted average of metrics) and does not consider any additional metrics in assessing school quality

### 2 Create Additional Metrics

Authorizer may work with schools to create additional metrics, which they can use:

- Informally**, to educate themselves about the model and inform their professional judgment
- Formally**, as additional metrics for accountability

### 3 Change Use of Standard Metrics

Authorizers hold schools accountable for meeting *at least one* standard metric; the school is assessed against each metric individually, not against the metrics collectively

There is no "right" answer. Authorizers should carefully consider trade-offs and execute strategy with the expectation of making adjustments along the way.

# ① No change: Authorizers may choose to maintain existing metrics of school quality

## Metrics: Tools

There are benefits and trade-offs for authorizers who choose not to change their metrics

### Benefits

- It **minimizes change management**, with no need to update processes or communication or establish buy-in from key stakeholders
- It **maintains comparability** of school quality data, for ease of access and analysis by stakeholders, especially families
- It **does not require additional capacity** or resources to develop or support the continued use of additional metrics

### Trade-offs

- It may **disadvantage or discourage** nontraditional schools, which could limit charter sector's ability to meet family demands
- It may require authorizers to use more **professional judgment** when school models affect performance against standard performance metrics, which can introduce ambiguity into bright lines of accountability
- It could **undermine trust in the accountability system**, if the community perceives a school as high quality, but it underperforms against standard metrics

### Authorizers should assess this approach within their own contexts and constraints:

- Do their existing metrics set a **minimum threshold** that they believe all schools should meet, regardless of school model? Could standard metrics be adjusted to **minimize the disadvantage** to nontraditional schools?
- What nontraditional models are in **demand** (and how much demand) from families? Are there **existing nontraditional schools**, how do they perform against standard metrics, and what is their potential for expansion?
- How might the current **size, quality, and politics** of the charter sector affect how this approach is received?

## ② Additional metrics: Trade-offs depend on whether additional metrics are used to inform judgment ...

### Metrics: Tools

#### a Creating additional metrics to inform authorizers' professional judgment — not accountability — has benefits and trade-offs

##### Benefits

- Authorizers develop a better understanding of the **theory of change** behind the school model
- Authorizers can quantify the **value proposition** of the school model, often tied to distinct needs of students in the community
- **Authorizers signal openness** to nontraditional models, encouraging more to apply and open

##### Trade-offs

- Authorizers **require additional capacity** for complexity of data, analysis, and review
- Authorizers **limit comparability** of data across schools, requiring more nuanced **communication** with stakeholders

##### Examples:

- Proficiency rate in a second language (e.g., Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency)
- Social-emotional learning outcomes (e.g., Panorama student survey)
- Cohort-based outcomes (for mixed grade-level school models)

#### Authorizers should assess this approach within their own contexts and constraints:

- How will the authorizer partner with schools to **develop additional metrics**?
- How will authorizers execute an effective **change-management process**, with families, community members, and their board? How will the authorizer **communicate their approach** to each audience?
- How will additional metrics inform their **professional judgment** in making recommendations and decisions about charter approval, renewal, and expansion?
- How will authorizers ensure that their staff and board **continue to use additional metrics informally**, as contextual information about the school model rather than as a formal metric for accountability?
- How might the current **size, quality, and politics** of the charter sector affect how this approach is received?



## ② Additional metrics: ... Or whether authorizers use additional metrics for purposes of formal accountability

### Metrics: Tools

#### b Creating additional metrics for use in school accountability has benefits and trade-offs

##### Benefits

- Enables more **comprehensive evaluation** of school model effectiveness and value proposition
- Holds schools **accountable for delivering the model they have promised** to families and the community

##### Trade-offs

- Risks **perception of inequity** or **lowering the bar** if the use of additional metrics dilutes other metrics
- Can create **unintended incentives** for school leaders and staff to pay more attention to metrics than to faithful implementation of the model
- Metrics are **harder to change** when formalized

##### Examples:

- Proficiency rate in a second language (e.g., Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency, or STAMP)
- Social-emotional learning outcomes (e.g., Panorama student survey)
- Cohort-based outcomes (for mixed grade-level school models)

#### Authorizers should assess this approach within their own contexts and constraints:

- How will the authorizer partner with schools not only to **develop additional metrics**, but also to **continuously monitor** school performance against the metrics?
- How will authorizers execute an effective **change-management process**, with families, community members, and their board? How will the authorizer **communicate their approach** to each audience?
- How will the authorizer **adjust additional metrics over time**, as needed, without undermining accountability?
- How will the authorizer **hold schools accountable for missing/meeting additional metrics**, and will that be different from how schools are accountable for missing/meeting standard metrics?
- How might the current **size, quality, and politics** of the charter sector affect how this approach is received?

2

# Additional metrics: Authorizers that use additional metrics can partner with schools to define what metrics should be

## Metrics: Tools

Some schools may need to first invest in articulating their model

★ Start Here

How do key elements of the **school model** support its distinct outcomes?

How does the school's ...

- curriculum?
- instructional approach?
- school culture?
- approach to talent?
- school schedule?
- external engagement?
- other?

... support its distinct outcomes?

### Example:

Students will receive 50% of instruction in Spanish

Note: >1 element of school model may support a distinct outcome

What are the school's **intended student outcomes** that are not captured by standard metrics?

What student-level outcomes related to ...

- specific knowledge?
- executive function?
- social-emotional health?
- cultural awareness?
- other?

... does this school's model enable/support?

Students will develop fluency in Spanish

What **tools and data** help the school assess its distinct outcomes?

How will the school use ...

- assessments?
- student diagnostics?
- student work portfolios?
- student/family surveys?
- other?

... to set targets and assess progress toward outcomes?

Students take Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) assessment

What **metrics** indicate the school is delivering distinct outcomes successfully?

How much will the outcomes improve, on what timeline?

In creating additional performance metrics, school leaders must set goals for what they plan to achieve for their students

90% of students who are enrolled from kindergarten will achieve fluency in Spanish by third grade

Past efforts to develop additional metrics have often created confusion. If authorizers take this path, it is important to do it well.

## ② Additional metrics: Authorizers must ensure that additional metrics are valid, reliable, and attainable

### Metrics: Tools

	Validity	Reliability	Attainability
Definition	A metric is valid if the instrument measures what it intends to measure	A metric is reliable if it produces consistent results under similar conditions	A metric is attainable if it uses sources of information that are (or can be) available
Guiding Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the instrument measure what you want it to?</li> <li>Is the metric a worthwhile indicator of learning or progress?</li> <li>Is the metric difficult to manipulate or “game”?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there sufficient sample size?</li> <li>Is the data collection process consistent?</li> <li>Is there limited potential for bias in how data is collected and analyzed?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is there a measurement instrument or source of data that is a suitable input for the metric?</li> <li>Is there a reliable way to collect data, now and in the future?</li> </ul>

Example	Valid?	Reliable?	Attainable?
To evaluate a school’s progress toward its mission of environmental education, a metric is based on the number of bottles collected during a recycling drive	X	✓	✓
To assess the quality of instruction, an authorizer (or school) administers a classroom observation rubric; however, evaluators who observe the same lesson rate it differently	✓	X	✓
To measure long-term outcomes, a metric is based on students’ earned annual income 20 years after high school graduation	✓	✓	X

Sources: The Graide Network, “[Importance of Validity and Reliability in Classroom Assessments](#),” 2018; [US Government Accountability Office](#), “[Assessing Data Reliability](#),” 2019; TKI, “[Reliability and Validity](#).”

## ② Additional metrics: Authorizers should be mindful of potential constraints for developing additional metrics

### Metrics: Tools

#### Additional Metric Considerations:



Is there sufficient **sample size**?

Schools with smaller enrollment or analyses with smaller sample sizes may result in larger fluctuations in outcomes. Data with a small sample size can be supplemented with additional longitudinal data



Is the metric **consistently tracked** over time?

Ideally, metrics do not (or rarely) change. Consistent metric definition and collection enables year-over-year comparisons and learning for both authorizers and schools



Does the metric use a **consistent scale**?

While rubrics or characteristics that define quality may differ by school model, metrics that have the same scale enables easier comparisons across schools and models



Are there **too many metrics**?

The number of metrics depends on the number of components in a school model. Authorizers and school leaders should prioritize quality of metrics over quantity, and focus on what measures matter *most*



Is the metric **informing actions and decisions**?

A metric is meaningful only if it is used for an intended purpose, often to inform continuous improvement. Authorizers and school leaders should consider removing metrics that are no longer used to drive actions or decisions

2

## Additional metrics example: Colorado CSI partners with schools to develop additional metrics specific to the model

### Metrics: Case Studies



#### Colorado CSI

- The Performance Framework **explicitly defines the measures by which CSI holds all charter schools accountable** with regards to academic, financial, and organizational performance
- In addition to the performance framework, **schools can develop mission-specific or model-specific measures** as supplemental analyses
- The authorizer incorporates mission-specific and model-specific measures as **supplemental analysis in its professional judgments**

“The model-specific work allows us to look at what components work well for that school and what value they add, beyond the basic agreement of being a public school.”

#### *Mission- and Model-Specific Measures*

##### Definitions:

- Mission-specific indicators are tailored to an individual school’s mission and vary accordingly (e.g., a school with a mission of developing students into engaged citizens may have a metric around students’ participation in community service projects)
- Model-specific indicators may apply to all schools that operate a similar model (e.g., all students in any dual language immersion school may have a metric around achieving proficiency in a second language)

##### Approach:

- Colorado CSI collaborates closely with schools to first understand their mission and model. It partners with the school leader to develop valid, reliable, and attainable metrics that capture the school’s desired outcomes; model-specific metrics developed through this process can be used across schools with similar models

### ③ Change the use of standard metrics: Other authorizers provide flexibility within standard metrics

#### Metrics: Tools

There are benefits and trade-offs for authorizers that set the same standards for all schools in their portfolio, but are flexible in how they use metrics for accountability

#### Benefits

- Authorizers **maintain comparability** of metrics between schools
- Authorizers are less likely to **penalize schools** on individual metrics that do not fit nontraditional models

#### Trade-offs

- Authorizers and schools may need **additional capacity** to complete additional data gathering, quality checks, and analysis
- Standard metrics still **may not capture the value proposition** of the school model
- This can be **perceived as lowering the bar** for quality, if some metrics have lower rigor and create “loopholes”

#### *Examples:*

- An authorizer may create a “beating the odds” metric that accounts for student characteristics in growth measures, and renew the school’s charter even if it falls short on other metrics of overall growth and proficiency
- An authorizer might renew the charter of a school whose students demonstrate college readiness on the ACT or SAT, regardless of performance on a high school graduation test

#### **Authorizers should assess this approach within their own contexts and constraints:**

- Do metrics have **comparable levels of difficulty**, so they provide reasonably equal accountability metrics and do not, in effect, lower the bar for quality?
- How will the authorizer **communicate with stakeholders** about schools that meet some but not all metrics? Does the authorizer have sufficient **capacity** to implement nuanced communications?
- How might the current **size, quality, and politics** of the charter sector affect how this approach is received?

3

# Change the use of standard metrics example: SCSC of Georgia has standard metrics, but uses them differently

## Metrics: Case Studies



### SCSC of Georgia

The SCSC of Georgia assesses performance based on school's **ability to outperform other schools in its attendance zone\* on one of six measures** of academic performance:

1. College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) Content Mastery
2. CCRPI Progress
3. CCRPI Grade Band Score
4. CCRPI Single Score
5. Value-Added Impact on student achievement
6. "Beating the Odds" designation

*"We have **many ways to assess innovation** that yield performance results. Our wealth of data allows us to have flexible ways to capture the success of schools."*

### Using Standard Metrics Differently

How it works for schools:

- Meeting at least one of the quality metrics is a sufficient indication of quality for a school to meet expectations.
- While not designed specifically with nontraditional schools in mind, this flexibility provides a number of ways for schools to demonstrate quality and has the effect of accommodating some nontraditional models.

How it works for the SCSC of Georgia:

- The SCSC of Georgia partners with the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement to access the data necessary to calculate schools' performance, and partners with Georgia State University to execute the analyses

\*Attendance zone comparison scores are generated at both the district and school level, assessing the performance of each school students would otherwise attend if the state charter school were not an option

# Table of Contents



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Strategies & Considerations for Improving Capacity

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Metrics

Strategies & Considerations for **Improving Communication**



# Effective communication with key stakeholders is crucial for fostering nontraditional schools

## Communication: Description

### Without effective communication strategies:

School founders may **not realize the authorizer's openness** to approving nontraditional schools, the **authorizer's board** may not understand the authorizer's approach to overseeing them, and **families and the broader public** may not have an accurate view of their value or performance. Authorizers might **miss the opportunity to build relationships** with nontraditional school leaders or **recognize their successes**.

### This can have at least five consequences:

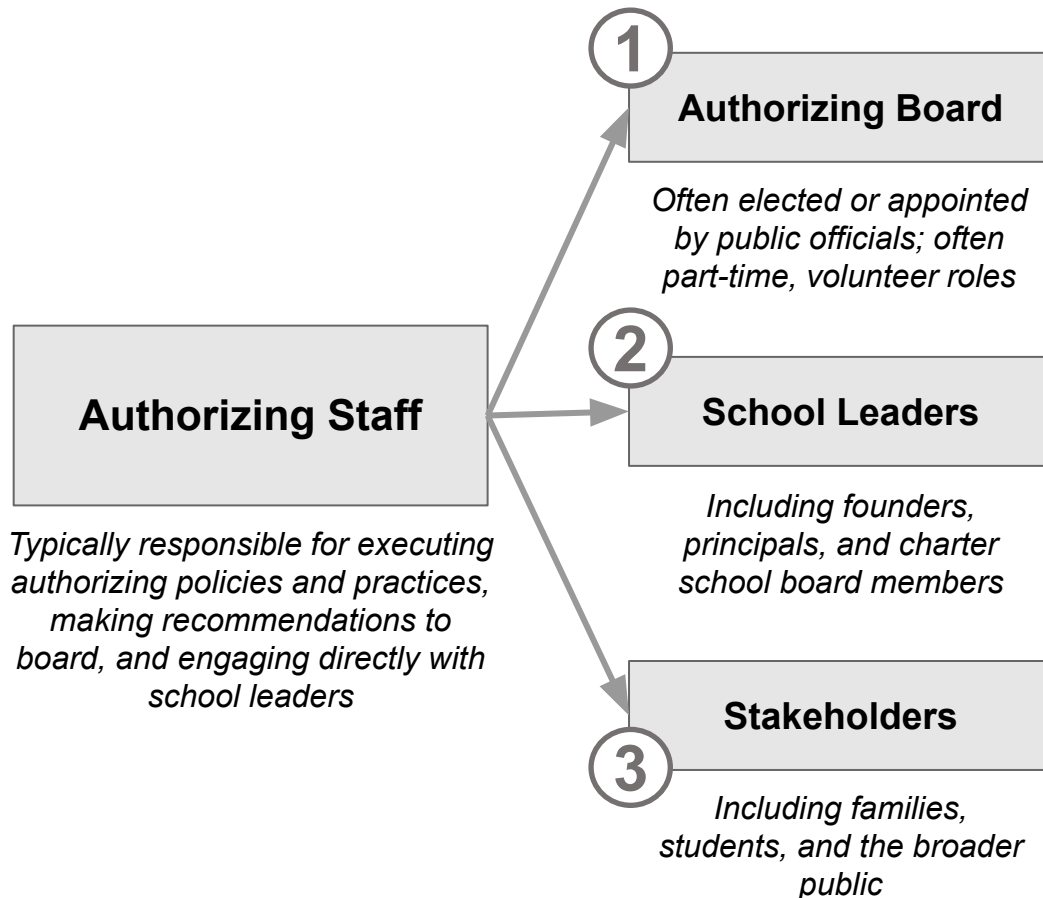
1. Authorizing **staff may not be positioned to understand, articulate, or champion** the value of nontraditional schools to stakeholders
2. Authorizing **boards may not be positioned to understand, articulate, or champion** the authorizer's approach to nontraditional schools
3. School founders **may be disincentivized from applying in the first place**
4. Nontraditional schools and authorizers **will not have trust and rapport** necessary to navigate challenges when they arise
5. Families and the broader public **may perceive nontraditional schools as lower quality** than they are

# To foster nontraditional schools, authorizers must effectively communicate with a variety of stakeholders

## Communication: Tools

**Authorizers must communicate with a variety of stakeholders ...**

**... with tailored objectives in mind**



Ensure **board understands and buys into** both the value of nontraditional schools and the authorizers' approach to holding them accountable

Build trust, collaboration, and **mutually productive relationships with leaders** of nontraditional schools

**Inform families, communities, and public** about the importance, diversity, and quality of all schools they oversee, including nontraditional options

# First and foremost, there are best practices for how authorizers communicate with various stakeholders

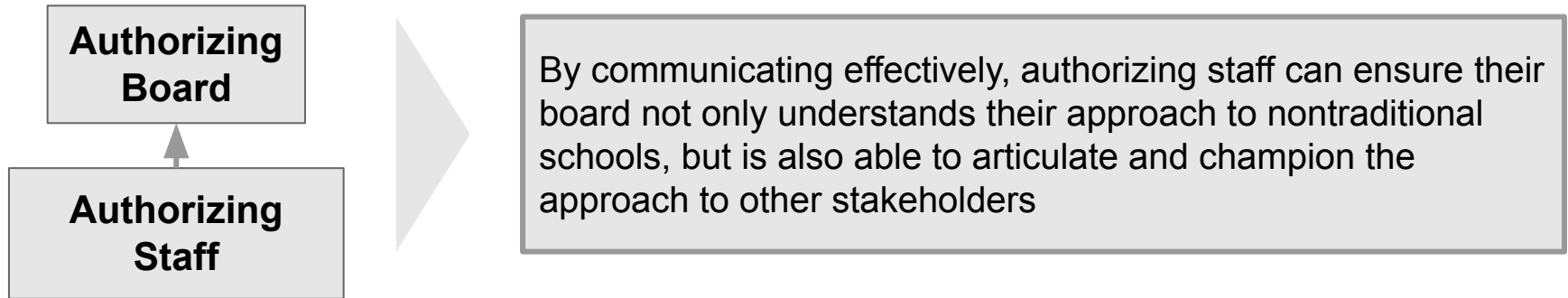
## Communication: Tools

These principles of communication are true for all authorizers but are particularly important for authorizers of nontraditional schools

- **Be proactive** by sharing rationale and knowledge of nontraditional schools to address common questions
- **Build and lean on strong relationships** with school leaders and other partners to collaborate on strengthening communication with stakeholders
- **Be evidence-based**, and use research and knowledge from partner organizations, as appropriate
- **Be transparent** about areas where you have developed a perspective from evidence and indicators, as well as areas where you are in a process of continued learning
- **Balance being comprehensive yet approachable** to address questions for a wide audience; avoid jargon
- **Provide examples** to ensure that abstract concepts are grounded in concrete illustrations of how nontraditional schools are different

# ① Authorizers can **communicate with their boards** to build understanding of their approach

## Communication: Tools



Regardless of relationships between authorizing staff and authorizing boards, staff should communicate with boards about their approach to nontraditional schools by ...

**... establishing transparency from the onset.** Authorizer staff should proactively share information with boards about the demand for nontraditional schools, the approach to school oversight, and any differences in how it intends to assess the quality of nontraditional schools

**... facilitating authentic engagement.** To build the board's awareness and knowledge of nontraditional schools, authorizer staff should invite board members to participate in school site visits and/or invite school model experts to brief board members

**... document and regularly report on progress.** Authorizer staff should include information on nontraditional schools in reports to the board — including the approach to oversight as well as summaries of models and performance in the authorizer portfolio

## ② Authorizers can **communicate with school leaders** to build trust and collaborative relationships

### Communication: Tools

To encourage potential school founders that the authorizer is welcoming of nontraditional school models ...

To build relationships with school leaders early and often, to establish trust and rapport necessary to resolve challenges ...

To partner with school leaders to convey value of nontraditional models to the authorizing board, families, and the broader public ...

To facilitate peer-learning networks for school leaders to learn from each other ...

#### Authorizers can ...

- **Sponsor and disseminate research** on family demand, including demand for nontraditional models
- **Highlight successes** of existing nontraditional schools on website and social media
- **Describe authorizer's approach** to nontraditional school models in new school application orientation meetings, application templates, etc.
- **Reach out to potential founders** early in application process to discuss their models

#### Authorizers can ...

- **Be transparent**, including their rationale for their approach to nontraditional schools and any limits on authorizer flexibility, so school leaders know what to expect
- **Make space for informal engagement**, including meetings with school leaders or site visits, specifically to learn about the model
- **Solicit feedback** and create opportunities for schools to provide input, and ask for examples of when and how school leaders experience challenges

#### Authorizers can ...

- **Invite leaders to share materials** or make presentations about their model to the authorizing board
- **Gather input from school leaders** about information to include in communications with stakeholders (e.g., annual reports for authorizers' portfolio or individual schools), such as descriptions of the model, school performance, and community demand

#### Authorizers can ...

- **Look for common challenges** for school leaders from various nontraditional school models to identify potential for sharing experiences and lessons learned

# 3 Authorizers can communicate with families, communities, and public about diversity, quality of options

## Communication: Tools

For families, communities, and the broader public, authorizers must carefully consider what **messages** they need to communicate, who the best **messengers** are, and the appropriate **mode of communication**. They must provide data in formats that are engaging and easy to navigate, and be careful to include **information useful and accessible to families and the community**; they must reinforce the authorizer's **commitment to ensuring high-quality schools**.

### Messages

How nontraditional school models are different

Why nontraditional schools are important

What nontraditional schools currently exist

What nontraditional schools are slated to open

The quality of nontraditional schools

How the authorizer assesses quality

Whether/how quality measures are different

### Messengers

Authorizing staff

Authorizing board

School leaders

Schools' families

Schools' students

Charter school advocates

Researchers

### Modes of Communication

Reports and publications  
e.g., annual reports, school report cards

Authorizer website  
e.g., interactive school directories

Third-party websites  
e.g., universal enrollment websites

Public meetings  
e.g., hearings on school applications, testimony to oversight bodies

Social media  
e.g., Twitter, Facebook

# Colorado CSI leverages peer-learning fellowships and technology to strengthen communications

## Communication: Case Studies



### Colorado CSI

- Colorado CSI uses its **interactive website** as a tool to communicate with families. On its website, families can filter schools by ratings, grade level, location, *and model* to find schools that best meet their needs
- To enable peer learning and provide training, tools, and coaching to schools, Colorado CSI implements a **School Improvement Fellowship**. The fellowship strengthens communications and relationship-building between authorizer and schools and across peer school networks
  - While fellowship is not exclusive to nontraditional schools, it has been particularly valuable as a peer-learning opportunity for leaders of nontraditional schools

### Interactive Website

A screenshot of the Colorado CSI website's interactive search interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, About, CSI Schools, Parents, and App. Below this is a search bar labeled "Map Locations" with a placeholder text: "Enter address or latitude or longitude or title or city or state or country or postal code here...". Underneath the search bar are four filter buttons: "CARS Rating", "Grade Levels Served", "Geographic District", and "Location". A "Model" dropdown menu is open, showing a list of educational models including Alternative Education Campus, Arts Integration, Blended Learning / Entrepreneurship, Classical, College Prep, Core Knowledge, Dual Language Montessori, Early Colleges, Language Immersion, Military Academy, Montessori, Personalized Learning, Place-Based, Project-Based Learning, and Waldorf. To the right of the dropdown, there are three school cards. The first card is for "ANIMAS HIGH SCHOOL" with details like address (271 Twin Buttes Avenue, Durango, CO 81301), phone (970-247-2474), website (http://animashighschool.com/), grades (9-12), model (Project-Based Learning), CARS Rating (Performance), and improvement plan (http://co-ujp-cde.force.com/?dcode=8001&amp;rcode=0075). The second card is for "AXIS INTERNAT" with address (2130 West CO 80526), phone (970-403-7333), website (https://www...), grades (PK-5), model (Language Im...), CARS Rating (New...), and improvement plan (http://co-ujp-cde.force.com/?dcode=8001&amp;rcode=...).

### School Improvement Fellowship

Conducted over quarterly virtual and in-person sessions, the School Improvement Fellowship targets supports to schools that need to develop the capacity to improve. The fellowship is intentionally an opt-in program — it is not punitive — with the intention of improving outcomes through capacity building.

# PCSB's informal meetings with school leaders and reports to the public on equity and quality help build trust

## Communication: Case Studies



### DC PCSB

- PCSB holds **“board-to-board” meetings** between authorizing board and boards of individual schools, establishing collaboration and lines of communication between oversight entities
- PCSB **publishes equity reports and school quality reports** to inform school leaders, families, and the general public of school performance
  - While PCSB’s strategies are not exclusive to nontraditional schools, the programming, collaboration opportunities, and reporting transparency benefit all schools, including nontraditional schools

### **“Board-to-Board” Meetings**

DC PCSB holds “board-to-board” meetings with the boards of charter schools. In these meetings, DC PCSB discusses items that may not have been included in the performance management framework but are an emerging area of concern. These meetings allow the authorizer to express concerns and discuss them candidly; they also allow school leaders a chance to discuss any misalignment between standard performance measures and the school’s nontraditional model. These informal opportunities for communication can support trust and collaboration between authorizers and schools — particularly important for navigating the challenges that can arise for nontraditional schools.



# Appendix

# Authorizer profile: Colorado Charter School Institute



- **Type of authorizer:** Independent chartering board
- **Year founded:** 2004
- **Jurisdiction:** Colorado
- **Number of schools:** 40
- **Number of students:** 18,275

## Approach to Nontraditional Schools

Colorado CSI expects all schools in its portfolio to meet standard measures of academic growth and achievement. At the same time, Colorado CSI approaches its work with an orientation toward understanding how schools measure their success, whether they are successful, and how Colorado CSI can help them improve.

Colorado CSI acknowledges that it does not have all of the answers for measuring school quality. And it recognizes that if it makes high-stakes decisions without the correct information, it risks closing high-quality, innovative schools that would excel if the accountability standards comprised more nuanced or comprehensive measures. Therefore, it leaves room for staff to use professional judgment when evaluating schools, informed by both qualitative observations and quantitative data.

# Authorizer profile: District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (PCSB)



- **Type of authorizer:** Independent chartering board
- **Year founded:** 1996
- **Jurisdiction:** Washington, D.C.
- **Number of schools:** 62 local education agencies, which operate 123 campuses
- **Number of students:** 43,911 students

## Approach to Nontraditional Schools

DC PCSB uses standard monitoring review metrics, called performance management frameworks (PMFs), to report annually on charter school quality and to inform expansion decisions. (DC PCSB has four PMFs: 1) Early Childhood, Elementary School, and Middle School; 2) High School; 3) Adult Education; and 4) Alternative Accountability.) High-stakes reviews for all schools, which take place every five years, are based on each school's goals (which are commonly the same as the metrics outlined in the PMF).

DC PCSB recognizes that nontraditional schools are in high demand from parents and indicates that it is very open to those schools. It does not believe that its authorizing practices have hindered the success or growth of nontraditional schools, and believes that all schools, regardless of model, should be able to meet expectations of the PMF.

# Authorizer profile: State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia (SCSC)



- **Type of authorizer:** Independent chartering board
- **Year founded:** 2012
- **Jurisdiction:** Georgia
- **Number of schools:** 35 schools
- **Number of students:** 32,565 students

## Approach to Nontraditional Schools

The SCSC of Georgia creates flexibility for nontraditional schools in how it uses multiple measures of school quality for accountability. In short, the SCSC of Georgia assesses schools against numerous individual metrics. Meeting at least one of the quality metrics is a sufficient indication of quality for a school to meet expectations. This flexibility provides a number of ways for schools to demonstrate quality and therefore helps accommodate nontraditional models. The SCSC of Georgia believes this approach balances the need for standard measures (all schools have the same set of measures to reach) and the need to provide multiple measures of success for nontraditional models.

# Authorizer profile: The State University of New York (SUNY) Charter Schools Institute



- **Type of authorizer:** Higher education institution
- **Year founded:** 1998
- **Jurisdiction:** New York state
- **Number of schools:** 186
- **Number of students:** 104,000

## Approach to Nontraditional Schools

SUNY CSI employs flexibility that is particularly beneficial to nontraditional school models in various parts of its authorizing process. SUNY CSI has some flexibility in how it uses data to inform its review process and the frequency of school renewals. The authorizer may take into account knowledge of a school's specific context in review processes in addition to leading indicators of a school's long-term success. SUNY CSI also has some flexibility when it comes to renewal timelines, such as for schools that may need more time to set up the unique components of their model. Finally, SUNY CSI acknowledges that non-academic measures of student progress may provide useful additional information about school quality. It is leading a pilot program, Active Ingredients, to develop and test alternative measures of school and student success.

# Acknowledgments

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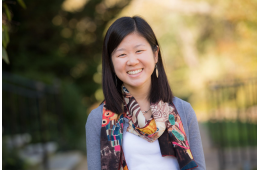
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*Several examples included in this toolkit are drawn from Bellwether clients, a list of whom is available on our website here: <https://bellwethereducation.org/who-we-work>.*

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