Authorizing Amid Coronavirus
A Toolkit for Authorizers and School Leaders

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Introduction

The original charter bargain was simple: Schools have increased autonomy over their model and operations in exchange for increased accountability for their outcomes. But what happens to that bargain if something — say, a global pandemic — forces charter school authorizers and school leaders to rapidly rethink school models, operations, and approaches to accountability?

Authorizers and school leaders face that question right now and, as the Bellwether team has written elsewhere, there are no easy answers. COVID-19 has upended how charter schools across the country are operating and how authorizers have historically held schools accountable for outcomes. Yet authorizers and school leaders are still responsible for ensuring that students and families have access to high-quality school options. Under these circumstances, authorizers and school leaders must work together to uphold each end of the charter bargain.

Fortunately, lessons from the pre-pandemic world can help authorizers define a path forward. "Nontraditional schools" — those with models or features that don't quite fit traditional authorizing practices — have existed in the charter school ecosystem from the beginning. And authorizers across the country have been working to identify alternative methods of holding these types of schools accountable and provide the necessary enabling conditions to allow them to thrive.

As the 2020-21 school year begins, nearly every school has adopted a model that could be considered "nontraditional." And there's reason to believe that schools will continue to adjust their models throughout the year. Students, particularly the country's most vulnerable students, need authorizers and schools to provide the best education possible under the circumstances. The toolkit that follows surfaces strategies for how to do just that.

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Past work on authorizing nontraditional schools offers lessons for authorizers and schools today

Last fall, we began research on how standard authorizing practices could discourage or disadvantage charter schools with nontraditional models, such as dual language immersion, Montessori, and competency-based education models.

Throughout the course of our research, we spoke to dozens of school leaders and authorizers to better understand how they work to ensure quality even when a school model looks substantially different than what's typical. While not the intent of our research, much of what we learned can apply to the charter school sector today. Specifically, authorizers and school leaders can work together to respond effectively to COVID-19 — by building their **capacity**, **communicating** with stakeholders, **codifying** their model, and **quantifying** their impact.

This toolkit includes strategies and recommendations for authorizers and school leaders as they navigate the coming months and years.

Resources on nontraditional schools, the foundation for this work, are available on the Bellwether website:
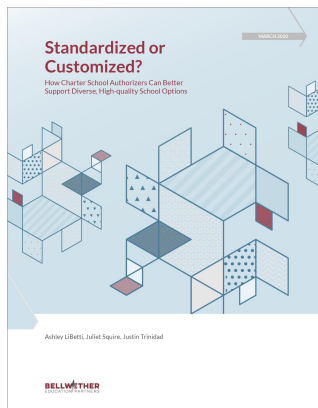
The **policy report** provides an analysis and detailed findings about the challenges and opportunities of authorizing nontraditional charter schools, with recommendations for authorizers, school leaders, funders, and policymakers
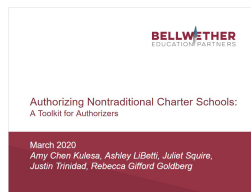
The **authorizer toolkit** outlines potential strategies for authorizers to consider in their efforts to foster a diversity of high-quality options, with actionable templates, tools, and frameworks to guide their work

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

Authorizers and school leaders must address four key challenges arising from COVID-19

	Challenge	Strategies
Build Capacity	Limitations in knowledge, expertise, time, and resources constrain how authorizers and school leaders adapt in response to COVID-19	Build as much knowledge as possible about COVID-19 and its implications for teaching and learning, using existing staff, data, and external partners
Codify the Model	School leaders must shift their school models to support students' health *and* learning, and authorizers must have line of sight into what those shifts entail	Codify school models — grounded in a theory of action that identifies challenges, strategies, and intended outcomes — and communicate the models to key stakeholders
Quantify the Impact	Authorizer and school performance metrics may no longer be effective or reasonable mechanisms for accountability, especially given the lack of state testing data	Develop metrics that minimize the burden on school leaders but that measure the intended outcomes of the school's new operating model
Communicate with Stakeholders	Key stakeholders will need clear and frequent information and updates, despite uncertainty	Build trust and ongoing communication between school leaders and authorizers, as well as with authorizing boards, families, and the broader public

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Limitations in knowledge, expertise, time, and resources constrain how authorizers and school leaders adapt

Build as much knowledge as possible about COVID-19 and its implications for teaching and learning, using existing staff, data, and external partners
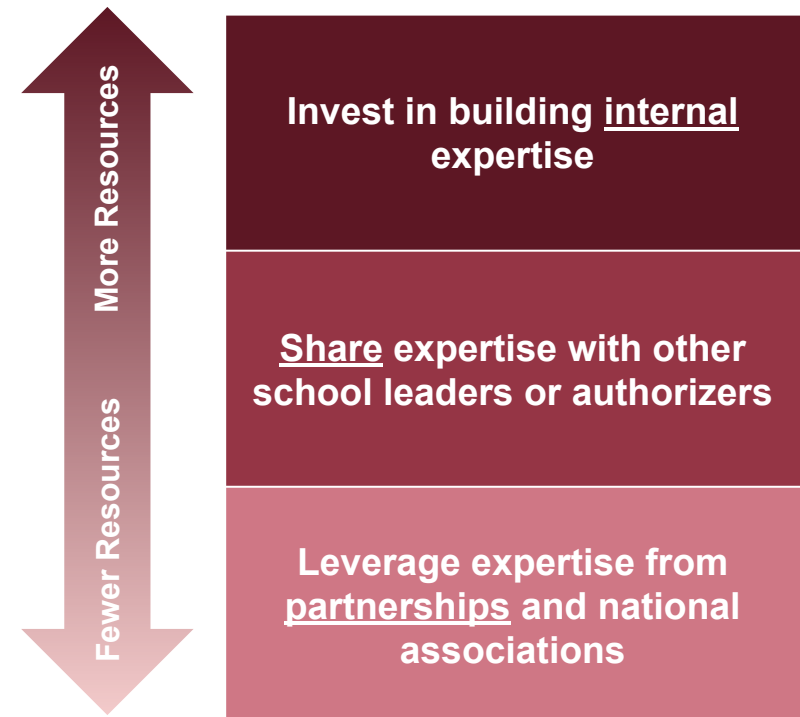
(1) Build expertise of **authorizing staff** and **school leaders**

(2) Build expertise of **school and authorizer governing boards** or other oversight entities

(3) Leverage expertise from **partnerships** and national associations

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① Build capacity: Authorizers and school leaders must contract, hire, or develop essential expertise

Authorizers and school leaders will benefit from building or accessing expertise in several domains:

1. **Distance learning** expertise, including in virtual instruction and social-emotional supports, to help sustain student learning
2. **Public health** expertise to provide up-to-date analyses of how to protect the safety of the school community, as well as comply with public health measures
3. **Communication** expertise to provide tailored, clear, and timely updates to students, families, and public officials, as well as to facilitate communication between schools and authorizers
4. **Measurement and evaluation** expertise to develop metrics that quantify the impact of the school's model and inform continuous improvement
5. **Technical** expertise to assess and support the technology requirements of distance education

The roles can be hired, contracted, or developed among existing staff, depending on available resources:

More Resources ↑ / Fewer Resources ↓

Invest in building <u>internal</u> expertise

<u>Share</u> expertise with other school leaders or authorizers

Leverage expertise from <u>partnerships</u> and national associations

To maximize efficiency, school leaders and authorizers should establish a clear approach to how they plan to build expertise, ensuring all domains are covered with minimal duplication of effort

To build the capacity of their boards, <u>school leaders</u> should ...

Collect and report information to the school board on how the school is adapting its model in response to COVID-19	• **Document** the school's model and its distinguishing characteristics (e.g., differences based on grade levels served, scenario planning, or instructional model) • **Develop a system** for continuously updating and sharing information about how the school's model will be monitored and adapted throughout the year
Inform the school board about how the board can help ensure school and student success	• **Describe approach and rationale** for assessing the implementation of the school's model and tracking student learning • **Present a dashboard of key metrics** so the board can monitor progress and provide support, as needed
Deepen knowledge of board members and/or respond to board member concerns	• **Arrange for experts, partners, peers** to speak/consult with the board to discuss application of emerging research and best practices • **Share the perspective or voice of advocates**, such as families, alumni, or community members, on what they want and need from the school

> School leaders can elevate challenges to their boards, as well as to their authorizers, to connect to additional expertise or resources

To build the capacity of their boards and oversight entities, <u>authorizer staff</u> should ...

Collect and report information on how schools are responding/ adapting	**Document** the models used by various schools and their distinguishing characteristics (e.g., differences based on grade levels served, enrollment, or educational model) **Develop a system** for continuously updating and sharing information about how schools' models are changing throughout the year
Inform the authorizing board and other oversight entities about how they can provide support and oversight	**Elevate shared challenges** among schools and within the community, and how the authorizing staff is providing support **Describe approach and rationale** for overseeing schools during this time to ensure board understanding and alignment **Present process for developing meaningful 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 experts, partners, peers** to speak/consult with the board to discuss application of emerging research and best practices **Share the perspective or voice of advocates**, such as families, alumni, or community members, on what they want and need

> Authorizers can serve as a hub for schools with similar models or experiencing similar challenges, facilitating peer-learning networks for school leaders

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

③ Build capacity: Authorizers and school leaders can leverage organizations and associations for expertise

By leveraging partnerships and other existing resources on responding to the effects of COVID-19, authorizers and school leaders can avoid reinventing the wheel and minimize the need for increasing internal capacity

Distance Learning Resources	• An Authorizer's Role in Supporting Remote Learning • Recommendations on the Best Tools for Distance Learning • New Strategies in Special Education as Kids Learn From Home • Remote Learning Programs for Students & Teachers • The National Standards for Quality Online Learning
Financial/ Operations Resources	• Federal COVID-19 Response Legislation and Charter Schools • Borrowing Short Term Vs Long Term During Uncertainty • Renegotiating Leases in the Time of Covid-19 • Virtual Fundraising in Times of Crisis With Charles Best • COVID-19 Resources: Supporting Students, Families, and Staff
Public Health Resources	• Schools and Childcare Programs: Plan, Prepare, and Respond • Operating Schools During COVID-19: CDC's Considerations • Connections During COVID-19: Mental Wellness Webinars for Families & Educators • COVID-19 Resources for Schools: Prevent, Protect, Mitigate
School Planning Resources	• Completing Your 2020-2021 Reopening Plan: A Practical Workbook for School Leaders • Resources to Support Special Populations of Students During COVID-19 • COVID-19 Strategic Planning Toolkit for Education & Nonprofit Leaders

School leaders are shifting their models, and authorizers must have insight into how schools are operating

School leaders must codify their model — grounded in a theory of action that identifies challenges, strategies, and intended outcomes — and communicate the model to stakeholders

(1) Authorizers and school leaders must **ask/anticipate questions** about various models for operating

(2) School leaders must **redefine their theory of change** to align to new operating models

(3) School leaders and authorizers must **articulate new school models** in accessible terms

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① Codify the model: School leaders must anticipate and respond to authorizer questions about their school model

Questions for authorizers to ask and school leaders to anticipate:

? What measures is the school taking to protect public health, and how will the school know which strategies are working and/or how to adjust them if they're not?

? What is the school's model for sustaining student learning? How does the school's model support student success?

? Does the school anticipate that the pace of student learning will change? Why, and how much?

? Does the school model have students learning content in a sequence different than they would otherwise? Why?

? How will the school continue to measure student growth, even if only to inform continuous improvement?

? How does instruction look different under the school's models? What should the authorizer look for when observing student-teacher interactions?

Who to ask for help

Experts in public health, specifically on issues related to children, staff, and schooling

Experts in distance education policy and practice

Other school leaders/authorizers who implement/oversee virtual schooling

Partners or associations that support high-quality implementation of distance learning

Researchers who study student needs and learning trajectories after disruptions to schooling

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② Codify the model: School leaders must redefine their theory of change to align to new operating models

What are the most crucial **challenges** related to COVID-19 that schools must address?	What **strategies** will the school use to address those challenges?	What are the school's **intended outcomes** for the new model?
How will ... ● lack of distance learning instructional expertise ● limited access to devices and/or internet ● food insecurity ● out-of-school responsibilities (e.g., child care/caretaking) ● student or staff illness ● other pandemic-related trauma **… require schools to rethink their priorities and practices?**	**How will the school's …** ● instructional coaching ● technology supports ● class schedule ● breakfast and lunch programs ● curriculum ● facilities maintenance and cleaning ● family engagement ● community partnerships **… address these challenges?**	**What student-level outcomes related to …** ● student learning ● engagement ● social-emotional health ● socialization and peer interaction ● specific knowledge ● health and safety ● executive function **… is the school's new operating model designed to prioritize?**

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③ Codify the model: School leaders must articulate their model to families, authorizers, and the community

To communicate with stakeholders in accessible terms, school leaders can anchor on developing a story that reflects their priorities and model:

Our school is focused on …	*We will accomplish this by …*
… ensuring student and staff safety	… conducting frequent cleaning, testing, and contact tracing
… sustaining student progress toward college and career readiness	… ensuring all students have a device and internet access and supporting our teachers in providing high-quality virtual instruction
… ensuring students have support to process trauma, especially as related to COVID-19	… partnering with community health providers to make counselors available to students

In addition, allowing and encouraging families to participate in **virtual site visits** will help them understand the school's model, and transparency will help build trust

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Authorizers and school leaders will need new ways to measure success and inform continuous improvement

Authorizers and school leaders must develop metrics that minimize the burden on school leaders but that measure the intended outcomes of the school's new operating model

1 School leaders must **identify metrics of success** for its new operating model

2 Authorizers must **adapt performance metrics** to assess student success and student/staff safety

3 Authorizers and school leaders must ensure new metrics are **valid, reliable, and attainable**

① Quantify the impact: School leaders must identify metrics of success for its new operating model

Start with intended outcomes identified in the theory of action *(see slide 11)*

What are the school's **intended outcomes** for student learning and student/staff safety?	What **tools and data** help the school assess its distinct outcomes?	What **metrics** indicate the school is delivering outcomes successfully?
What student-level outcomes related to … ● student learning ● engagement ● social-emotional health ● socialization and peer interaction ● specific knowledge ● health and safety ● executive function **… is the school's new operating model designed to prioritize?**	**How will the school use …** ● assessments ● student diagnostics ● student work portfolios ● student/family surveys ● COVID-testing data ● other **… to set targets and assess progress toward outcomes?**	**How much will the outcomes improve, on what timeline?** In creating or adapting metrics, school leaders must set goals for what they plan to achieve for their students, and when

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② Quantify the impact: Authorizers must adapt performance metrics to assess student success and student/staff safety

Metrics of school quality typically cover six domains

Student growth/progress	Student achievement (proficiency)	Postsecondary readiness
Mission- or model-specific goals	Student and family engagement and well-being	Opportunity gaps

Authorizers and school leaders should interrogate each domain ...

- What question are we trying to answer by measuring school performance in this domain?
- What metrics have we used to measure this domain in the past?
- What complications may prevent us from using those metrics now?
- What are other ways we could get at the questions that these metrics are intended to help us address?
- What barriers might get in the way of using these other approaches?

… and assess which metrics are more important for assessing school performance during COVID-19

- Do your metrics around student and family well-being capture engagement in a digital learning environment?
- Do your measures of opportunity gaps capture inequitable access to devices and internet access?
- Are there mission-specific goals that are no longer achievable or applicable due to social distancing requirements?
- What additional data is needed to assess and address student learning loss?

Source: Content drawn from joint research of Bellwether and NACSA ([here](#))

(3) **Quantify the impact:** Authorizers and school leaders must ensure metrics are valid, reliable, and attainable

	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	• Does the instrument measure what you want it to? • Is the metric a worthwhile indicator of learning or progress? • Is the metric difficult to manipulate or "game"?	• Is there sufficient sample size? • Is the data collection process consistent? • Is there limited potential for bias in how data is collected and analyzed?	• Is there a measurement instrument or source of data that is a suitable input for the metric? • Is there a reliable way to collect data, now and in the future?

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."

Key stakeholders will need clear and frequent information and updates, despite uncertainty

Authorizers and school leaders must build trust and ongoing communication between school leaders and authorizers, as well as with authorizing boards, families, and the public

1. Authorizers and school leaders must communicate with each other, which requires **trust and relationship-building**

2. Authorizers and school leaders must **clearly communicate with stakeholders**, including staff, families, and their community

3. Authorizers and school leaders should adhere to communications **best practices**

Note: Every strategy outlined above supports and requires strong communication between authorizers, school leaders, and their stakeholders, and some additional communications best practices are especially important during a time of uncertainty

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① Communicate with Stakeholders: Authorizers and school leaders must have strong, transparent relationships

To facilitate communication, be transparent

Authorizers can …
- **Explain their rationale** for their approach to school support and oversight and any limits on their flexibility, so school leaders know what to expect
- **Disseminate and help translate research** on what experts do and do not know about efforts to protect public health and sustain student learning
- **Model a willingness to change course** if planned approaches aren't working or as new information becomes available

School leaders can …
- **Demonstrate commitment to continuous improvement** by sharing how their model evolves over time in response to changing circumstances, and sharing challenges encountered along the way
- **Proactively share information** and context of your school model, including the rationale of how the school will assess implementation and impact on student outcomes

To facilitate communication, build relationships

Authorizers can …
- **Make space for informal engagement**, including meetings with school leaders or virtual site visits, specifically to learn about each school's model
- **Solicit feedback** and create opportunities for schools to provide input, and ask for examples of when and how school leaders experience challenges
- **Celebrate successes** on website and social media of schools that are making noteworthy progress, achieving impact, and proving what's possible

School leaders can …
- **Participate in opportunities for informal engagement** to share on-the-ground perspective and surface challenges early and often
- **Emphasize that student well-being** is the first priority that informs all decisions, being candid about the trade-offs they make to protect public health and their efforts to mitigate effects on learning

② Communicate with Stakeholders: Authorizers must consider the messages, messengers, and mode

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 school model approaches are different from one another

Why it's okay for schools to have different approaches

How the school will implement continuous improvement

How the authorizer will monitor implementation and quality

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., FAQs, school directories

Third-party websites
e.g., parent ratings websites

Public meetings
e.g., hearings and testimony to oversight bodies

Social media
e.g., Twitter, Facebook

③ **Communicate with Stakeholders**: Authorizers and school leaders should adhere to communications best practices

These principles of communication apply beyond the current crisis, but are especially important during this time of disruption and uncertainty

- **Be proactive** by sharing rationale and knowledge of schools' approaches to address common questions

- **Build and lean on strong relationships** between authorizers and school leaders and with other partners to strengthen 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 and have evidence, 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

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Appendix

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