

Standardized or Customized?

How Charter School Authorizers Can Better Support Diverse, High-quality School Options



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Foreword

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.

Executive Summary

From its origins, one of the greatest promises of the charter school movement has been its potential to enable the creation of diverse school models to meet the varied needs of children, families, and communities. As policy and charter leaders recognized the need to hold charters accountable for strong standards of performance, however, there has been a move toward more standardized ways of evaluating the potential and performance of both current and proposed charter schools. More consistent standards have helped elevate quality in the sector, but have also created potential obstacles to nontraditional school models — including dual language, inquiry-based, and competency-based models, among many others — at the very moment parents and communities are increasing demand for these types of schools.

Authorizers sit at the nexus of these opposing forces. They have the singular opportunity, and responsibility, to ensure that diverse school models can flourish, effectively serve students, and are available to all families who want them. Many authorizers are energized by the potential of building a portfolio of high-quality, nontraditional school models, but face challenges in knowing how to balance autonomy and accountability.

Through interviews with sector veterans, school leaders, and authorizers, this report seeks to shed light on what it looks like in practice when authorizers foster a diversity of school models and hold them accountable for quality. We identified authorizing practices that can deter diverse school models and may limit their ability to open, thrive, and expand. We describe how some authorizers are navigating the tension between maintaining consistent standards and fostering diverse models. And we offer recommendations for how authorizers and other stakeholders can work to find the optimal balance.

Schools with nontraditional models experience challenges with standard authorizing practices. For example, standard performance metrics may conflict with a school's model or not capture the model's unique value. Site visit protocols may be a poor fit for a school's instructional approach, and authorizers' reports to the public may not fully communicate what truly makes a school distinct. While each individual challenge may seem small, they accumulate to limit diversity in the charter sector.

Some authorizers have proactively sought to balance their commitment to standards of quality with their desire to encourage the growth of nontraditional schools. They often rely on additional data and professional judgment to inform key decisions, leverage external capacity and expertise to supplement their ability to assess different school models, and express a vested interest in the success of the schools they oversee.¹ Yet unresolved tensions between standardized quality control mechanisms and nontraditional models still place many extra burdens on these schools and their leaders.

Luckily, there are steps that authorizers and other sector stakeholders can take to ensure they approach these complex and messy issues thoughtfully – and all in the service of providing families a diversity of high-quality school options.

Recommendations for Authorizers:

- Augment the expertise of authorizer staff and their governing boards to oversee nontraditional schools.
- Signal to potential school founders that authorizers are interested in and welcoming of nontraditional school models.
- Invest early and often in building relationships with the leaders of nontraditional schools.
- Work with experts and leaders of approved nontraditional schools to ensure suitable metrics of success for the performance contract.
- Augment analysis against standard performance metrics with additional information, especially from the school community.
- Be aware of the potential for unconscious bias to affect analysis and perspectives.
- Consider how to communicate with families, oversight entities, and other stakeholders about the distinct value of nontraditional school models.
- Seek a seat at the table when it comes to designing state accountability systems, so the broader field can benefit from lessons learned.

Recommendations for School Leaders:

- Build relationships with authorizers to foster trust and communication in advance of any challenges that arise.
- Quantify and communicate family demand for nontraditional models.
- Invest in educating authorizers about specific school models.
- Anticipate potential pain points and proactively reach out to authorizers if adjustments are necessary.
- Develop internal measures of program quality and consider communicating them with authorizers.
- Build relationships with leaders of other nontraditional school models to share approaches and lessons learned.

Recommendations for Funders and Other Sector Support Organizations:

- Define risk tolerance for nontraditional schools, and lend support accordingly.
- Support research and development of nontraditional school models.
- Leverage existing networks and resources.
- Explore whether third-party accreditation could serve as a meaningful and enforceable complement to standard authorizing.
- Invest in the development of alternative measures of school quality.
- Foster professional networks in which school leaders and authorizers can learn from each other.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

- Ensure that each jurisdiction has access to at least one authorizer with sufficient financial resources, capacity, and expertise to authorize nontraditional schools well.
- Ensure authorizers with strong records of effectiveness have flexibility to exercise professional judgment.
- Make sure that charter authorizers have a seat at the table in discussions of state accountability systems.

Introduction

Less than five miles north of the border between the U.S. and Mexico, a dual Spanish/English charter school provides instruction in both languages and pushes students to understand their identity as a foundation for engaging in today's global society. A charter school in St. Louis, adopting the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori, allows student curiosity to guide its model of instruction. A charter high school in Boston implements a No Excuses model, which includes high expectations, extended learning time, strict discipline, and rigorous test preparation. These schools illustrate the diversity of high-quality options the charter sector provides for students and families.²

Fostering a diversity of models is one of the great opportunities of the charter sector. A one-size-fits-all approach has proven to have limited utility, and charter schools are positioned to develop approaches and models that meet a variety of student needs. Moreover, in a country as large as ours, families and communities will have different ideas about the education they want for their children, and the charter sector can help accommodate that pluralism.

Of course, alongside the potential for a diversity of school models, a great mandate of the charter sector is also to ensure school quality. Especially in the early days of the sector, inadequate accountability practices allowed for too many low-performing charter schools. With the support of organizations like the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), many charter school authorizers — the gatekeepers of which schools are permitted to open and operate — have worked to shore up their own practices, especially consistent standards of quality, in order to improve the performance of the schools they oversee.

Today, the pipeline of new charter school models is becoming increasingly diverse,³ and, alongside stronger authorizing practices, the quality of the sector overall is improving.⁴ Yet, to some degree, these trends are in tension with one another. Strong authorizing practices require consistent standards, which enable transparency and consistency, and help authorizers identify and sanction schools that underperform. Meanwhile, the adage “you get what you measure” is as true for charter schools as it is in any system of accountability in any sector. Consistent standards of school quality incentivize schools to open and operate models designed to meet *those* standards.⁵ Overlaid on this tension is the reality that access to a diversity of school models is not evenly distributed. No Excuses schools, which tend to emphasize test preparation and strict discipline, tend to serve more low-income students and students of color than schools with project-based or inquiry-based models.⁶

Authorizers sit at the center of this reality, which provides them a singular opportunity, and responsibility, to ensure that diverse school models can flourish, do not run amok, and are available to all families who want them.

There are no “right answers” for how authorizers should navigate the intersection of school model diversity, quality, and equity. Differences in family demands, the quality of the existing school options, and local political context mean that what works for one authorizer may not work for another. Moreover, authorizers working to effectively oversee just a handful of schools in their portfolios may not have the need or bandwidth to engage in this complex set of issues.

But — for authorizers that are energized by the potential of building a portfolio of high-quality, diverse school models and that are eager to work through ambiguity to lead the field — there are a number of approaches, strategies, and trade-offs for consideration.

Through interviews with sector veterans, school leaders, and authorizers, this paper seeks to shed light on what authorizing a diversity of school models with quality looks like in practice. We identified some authorizing practices that can deter diverse school models and may limit their ability to open, thrive, and expand. We describe how some authorizers are navigating the tension between maintaining consistent standards and fostering diverse models. And we offer recommendations for how authorizers and other stakeholders can work to find the optimal balance. We hope these analyses and recommendations help the charter sector deliver on its promise of providing more students and families with a diversity of high-quality options.

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Defining the Diversity of School Models

There are numerous ways to classify school models, and several recent reports have sought to do so.⁷ This report draws from the 19 school models codified in a 2019 NACSA report, which include schools with specific curricular focus areas (e.g., STEM), instructional approaches (e.g., inquiry-based), and target student populations (e.g., special education).⁸ We intentionally exclude schools that target specific student populations from this analysis. These schools present challenges for standard authorizing practices, but merit a separate, thorough analysis.

Hereafter, we refer to models with specific curricular focus areas or instructional approaches as “nontraditional” schools. Among these, three nontraditional models are relatively common and provide useful illustrations of the tension between nontraditional school models and standard authorizing practices:

- **Inquiry-based** schools revolve curriculum and practices around the belief that children should be given the opportunity to “learn by doing” in a protective and supportive environment. Inquiry-based schools focus on student-driven learning that teaches students to be problem solvers. Examples of inquiry-based models include Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Expeditionary Learning models.
- **Dual language immersion** schools 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. Competency-based schools provide distinct supports and instruction to allow students to progress at a meaningful rate.

Other nontraditional schools also experience tension with standard authorizing practices. A classical school, for example, may be disadvantaged because its curriculum progresses through content and skills in a different order than that reflected in state assessments. A vocational school may believe that state assessments focused on academic subjects fail to capture the job skills that students learn during work-based learning experiences. Moreover, the most innovative school models – those that challenge fundamental assumptions about schooling – are even more likely to present challenges for standard authorizing practices.

This report draws examples from a subset of nontraditional models for the sake of clarity and consistency, but we believe the findings and recommendations are broadly applicable to other nontraditional and innovative models.

This report draws examples from a subset of nontraditional models for the sake of clarity and consistency, but we believe they are broadly applicable to other nontraditional and innovative models. We hope our recommendations may serve not only to improve the charter sector’s ability to foster a diversity of high-quality options, but also help create fertile ground for novel approaches to schooling, including those not yet conceived.

Defining the Challenge

Understanding Levers of the Authorizing Cycle and Their Challenges for Nontraditional Schools

Though each of the individual challenges described below may seem small on its own, ultimately they accumulate to limit the charter sector from realizing its potential for school diversity.

Many schools with nontraditional models are currently open and thriving, so standard authorizing practices are clearly not *insurmountable* barriers. Though each of the individual challenges described below may seem small on its own, ultimately they accumulate to limit the charter sector from realizing its potential for school diversity. For authorizers who are dedicated to fostering a diversity of high-quality options, it is essential to understand how challenges manifest for nontraditional schools.

Defining the Levers

Based on NACSA's standards and recommended practices for authorizing,⁹ as well as interviews with school leaders, authorizers, and charter sector experts, we anchor our analysis of these challenges around the five "levers" in the authorizing process in which they occur.

Application, approval, and chartering: Authorizers review and approve new school applications, and sign a charter contract with approved schools delineating performance expectations. Application processes typically involve a written application, interviews with the school's founding team, and some form of presentation to the authorizer. Charter schools have the opportunity to communicate the distinctive elements of their

school model during each of these steps. Typically, once a school receives approval, the authorizer and the school negotiate the terms of its charter contract, which includes the duration of the charter, the timeline for high-stakes reviews, and — most importantly — the performance goals that authorizers use to assess school quality throughout the authorizing process.

Monitoring reviews: Authorizers conduct periodic, often annual, monitoring reviews of schools' progress toward financial, operational, and academic goals. Monitoring reviews are often required by state law, though authorizers typically have discretion on their design and implementation. In a monitoring review, authorizers check in on a school's progress toward its charter goals and analyze a school's performance on standard metrics defined by the authorizer, often referred to as performance management frameworks. Authorizers typically publish the outcomes of monitoring reviews through an annual report card or school performance profile. The metrics used in monitoring reviews may or may not be the same as the goals in a school's charter contract.

High-stakes reviews: Typically at the end of the school's charter term, authorizers must decide if the school is permitted to continue operating. These high-stakes reviews include many of the same financial, operational, and academic data collected for monitoring reviews. They also often include site visits, consisting of classroom observations, meetings with the board, or conversations with parents and staff. If a school meets the terms and goals in its charter contract, authorizers typically renew the school for another full term. If a school is on the "cusp," authorizers may renew a school with conditions (e.g., require a school to hit a certain milestone within a certain amount of time, or be closed) or offer a shorter renewal term. Schools that do not meet the terms of its charter, and which the authorizer determines should not be permitted to continue serving students, do not receive renewal and have to close.¹⁰

Model expansion: Model expansion is an opportunity for a school to apply to the authorizer to serve additional students. Schools can either apply for an additional charter to implement their model on another campus, or they can apply to amend their charter to serve additional students in their existing schools. Authorizers consider a number of different factors in expansion decisions, including operational capacity and financial viability. The authorizer may also look for evidence of community need and support, as measured by waitlist data, letters of support from community stakeholders, and evidence that the school has engaged community members. Importantly, a school's past academic performance, as measured by progress toward achieving performance metrics, is a central consideration — and some authorizers have streamlined expansion processes specifically designed for high-performing schools.

“Soft” levers: “Soft” levers is an umbrella term for the interactions between authorizers, schools, and the public, outside of the formal levers of accountability. During these interactions, schools and authorizers can focus less on how to present and defend their perspectives and focus more on building trust and opening channels of communication. Authorizers may use these levers to communicate an emerging concern or discuss an opportunity for expansion. School leaders may use them to share important context about their school’s model and performance. A particularly important soft lever of accountability is the authorizer’s communication with stakeholders, including policymakers, community members, and families. These communications shape public perception of a school’s quality, invoking other elements of accountability. For instance, communications from the authorizer can influence if/how policymakers seek to change charter policy, how communities perceive the quality of charter schools, and where parents choose to enroll their children.

The Role of Standard Performance Metrics

One particular element of the authorizing process surfaces repeatedly across these five levers and requires special attention: **standard performance metrics**. A school’s ability to perform against these metrics is a common input into an authorizer’s charter approval decisions, monitoring reviews, high-stakes reviews, and school expansion decisions.

Standard performance metrics vary in what they measure and how they are used. They commonly include growth and proficiency on state assessments, indicators of college and career readiness such as high school graduation and ACT or SAT scores, and student attendance and reenrollment rates. Sometimes authorizers develop and use standard performance metrics as tools for monitoring school performance during the course of their charter, and to inform the public about school quality. Sometimes standard performance metrics serve double duty as schools’ performance goals, baked into each school’s charter contracts. In addition to standard performance metrics, many authorizers also allow schools to develop additional metrics to reflect a school’s distinguishing characteristics.

The following section outlines the challenges that nontraditional schools experience with authorizing levers. Challenges listed in **burgundy** stem from standard performance metrics; challenges listed in **blue** are related to other authorizing levers.

APPLICATION, APPROVAL, AND CHARTERING

Challenges Nontraditional Schools Experience with Authorizing Levers

Authorizers review and approve new school applications, and sign a charter contract with approved schools delineating performance expectations.

Challenges Nontraditional Schools Experience with Standard Performance Metrics

- **Standard performance metrics may conflict with a school’s instructional model.** Goals around year-end standardized assessment performance can be poorly suited for schools that do not follow a standard one-year/one-grade trajectory. For instance, Montessori schools group students in multiage bands (e.g., the “upper elementary” band includes all students ages 9-12) and allow students to work through their own learning continuum throughout those years. Students progress at their own pace, which may or may not align with standard year-end expectations. Goals based on annual standardized test performance incentivize schools to rearrange their instruction to better align with what is tested, rather than what is authentic to their model.
- **Standard performance metrics may not effectively capture the distinct value of a nontraditional school model.** Authorizers that use standard performance metrics to drive charter goal-setting may miss the opportunity to assess and recognize schools on mission-specific priorities. Dual language immersion schools, for example, are dedicated to developing student proficiency in a second language. Standard contract goals that focus only on English proficiency will not capture students’ growth in a second language – the distinct value offered by a dual language immersion school.
- **When nontraditional schools have the opportunity to write mission-specific goals, they often lack the expertise to do so.** Authorizers that allow schools to propose mission-specific goals do so to address the above challenges and better accommodate nontraditional school models. However, even if this option is available, school founders may not have the expertise or capacity to develop valid, reliable, and attainable measures of the features that make their models distinct. A school with an environmental focus might be able to measure and report the number of bottles it collected for recycling, for instance, but it wouldn’t be a meaningful measure of their performance.
- **Deviating from goals based on standard performance metrics comes with risks.** Even when authorizers allow mission-specific goals and school leaders have the wherewithal to develop them, school leaders may be deterred by the risk of doing so. Authorizers do not generally allow mission-specific goals to replace goals based on standard performance metrics, so mission-specific goals are *in addition* to the standard goals. Falling short of performance expectations is grounds for charter termination, so every additional goal adds risk.

Challenges with Other Authorizing Levers

- **Nontraditional school models may struggle to get approved in the first place.**¹¹

Authorizers often use standard rubrics to evaluate new school applications and, with limited understanding of the model, it can be difficult to map the content of a nontraditional school application to the requirements of the rubric. The authorizer may therefore be less willing to move that school forward in the process. Moreover, if they don't think their models fit charter authorizer standards or requirements, the founders of potential nontraditional schools may never apply or may decide to open private schools instead. Several school leaders indicated their applications were rejected on the basis of concerns with their model. Some eventually received approval; others never did.

MONITORING REVIEWS

Authorizers conduct periodic, generally annual, monitoring reviews of schools' progress against financial, operational, and academic goals; results are often published in an annual report card or school performance profile.

Challenges Nontraditional Schools Experience with Standard Performance Metrics

- **Monitoring reviews based on standard performance metrics may not accurately reflect the performance of nontraditional schools.** Dual language immersion schools, for example, build target language proficiency by teaching core subject areas like math and science in the target language. As a result, however, students may be delayed in achieving proficiency in these subjects and in English, as measured by state-required standardized assessments. In the early years, when students are still learning the language, they will progress more slowly than if they were only receiving instruction in their native language. Research shows that students will “catch up” and, often by fifth grade, achieve the desired proficiency in the long term.¹² But before that point, dual language immersion students may not perform as well, as quickly, on standardized assessments as their counterparts in English-only schools.

Competency-based schools also experience challenges. These schools are not designed for year-end standardized achievement assessments. Instead, students attending competency-based schools demonstrate mastery throughout the school year. Students' progression is different than in traditional models, and therefore they may not learn the same content or in the same sequence measured by standardized assessments.

- **Schools may adopt practices in conflict with their model, in order to perform better on standard monitoring review metrics.** For example, inquiry-based schools that actively avoid technology in the classroom may experience challenges with state assessments administered on computers, regardless of their students' content mastery. In fact, some inquiry-based schools we spoke to have modified their curricula to teach students how to use computers for the sole purpose of taking state tests. (This challenge, of course, relates to the use of computer-based assessments in general, not just how they are used in performance metrics.)

HIGH-STAKES REVIEWS

Typically at the end of the school's charter term, authorizers must decide if the school is permitted to continue operating. These high-stakes reviews include many of the same data collected for monitoring reviews and also often include site visits.

Challenges Nontraditional Schools Experience with Standard Performance Metrics

- **When standard performance metrics used during high-stakes reviews do not fully capture their quality, nontraditional schools are more likely to be on the cusp between renewal and closure.** When a school's quality is underestimated by standard performance metrics, the consequences of that disadvantage manifest during high-stakes reviews. During high-stakes reviews, performance metrics that fail to recognize the results a school produces can tilt an authorizer toward closing a school that is higher quality than those metrics suggest. For example, a Montessori school that is exceptional at building children's executive function skills — which are a protective factor against other academic risks¹³ — may still be at a higher risk of closure if it has mediocre results on standard performance metrics.

Challenges with Other Authorizing Levers

- **Authorizers' standard rubrics for site visits and classroom observations may be misaligned with the instructional approaches in nontraditional schools.** To inform site visits conducted as part of high-stakes reviews, authorizers may use standard observation protocols, such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System¹⁴ (CLASS). CLASS rewards teacher-student interactions, measured through how — and how often — the teacher verbally pushes children's thinking and provides feedback and support. Montessori schools, however, prioritize large blocks of uninterrupted work time, where children drive their own learning. Teachers are discouraged from engaging with children during this time. As a result, Montessori schools may underperform on this specific tool because their model of instruction is markedly different from other schools. This is just one example; any classroom observation tool will be better or worse tools for capturing the quality of instruction, depending on the school model.
- **Complex program designs may take more time for nontraditional schools to fully launch, which can negatively affect their performance on high-stakes reviews conducted at set intervals.** The norm for high-stakes review timelines is five years, but this may not provide nontraditional schools sufficient time to design, implement, and iterate on their models. A competency-based model, for example, may require schools to construct an entirely new scope and sequence when developing content for students.¹⁵ This process takes time to design and refine, and may affect the rate at which students progress and reach target achievement scores. As a result, competency-based schools' performance may lag behind the standard timeline as they attempt to customize how students learn, and they may be penalized for that during high-stakes review decisions.

MODEL EXPANSION

Model expansion is an opportunity for a school to apply to the authorizer to serve additional students.

Challenges Nontraditional Schools Experience with Standard Performance Metrics

- **When expansion decisions are based on past performance on standard metrics, nontraditional schools may be disadvantaged in the expansion process.** Many authorizers require schools to demonstrate exceptional performance on standard monitoring metrics before they expand. This standard may disproportionately prevent nontraditional schools from expanding, or require these schools to go through a more arduous expansion approval process because they are ineligible for the streamlined process available to schools that perform well against the standard metrics. For instance, if the inquiry-based sequence of instruction in a Montessori school causes that school to perform marginally worse on performance metrics, that marginal difference may be enough to produce additional barriers to that school's expansion.
- **Nontraditional schools must again build the case for their model during expansion decisions.** As with the application, approval, and chartering process, nontraditional schools seeking to expand often must take on the burden of developing a more comprehensive, research-based, and detailed future strategy proposal to accommodate authorizers' unfamiliarity with the model. Nontraditional schools may find it difficult to earn an authorizer's endorsement for expansion, and authorizers may be less likely to encourage them to grow.

"SOFT" LEVERS

"Soft" levers is an umbrella term for the interactions between authorizers, schools, and the public that occur outside of the formal levers of accountability.

Challenges Nontraditional Schools Experience with Standard Performance Metrics

- **Nontraditional schools may be disadvantaged in conversations with authorizers about emerging areas of concern, particularly if the authorizer is not aware of how the school's model may produce reasonable variations.** Nontraditional schools may be disadvantaged in conversations with authorizers about emerging areas of concern, particularly if the authorizer is not aware of how the school's model may produce reasonable variations. Authorizers that do not understand a school's model may unnecessarily flag a school's expected or reasonable performance on a standard metric as an emerging concern. Repeated flags for emerging areas of concern can negatively affect authorizer and public perception of the school. On the flip side, nontraditional schools that do not have the opportunity to demonstrate excellence on the distinct components of their model may also be less likely to receive encouragement from the authorizer to grow. Competency-based high schools, for example, can appear to underserve students if progress is only assessed based on course credit hours, and may not be appropriately recognized for student progress on achieving competencies.

- **When public performance reports only include standard performance metrics, nontraditional school models may miss opportunities to highlight successes of their unique components.** The information that an authorizer shares shapes public perception of a school's quality. If the information an authorizer communicates only includes standard performance metrics, nontraditional schools' quality may be inaccurately deflated and/or they might not effectively communicate to the public the qualities that make them distinct from other school options. There is evidence that dual language immersion schools, for example, improve children's cognitive flexibility, which is crucial for problem solving and inhibiting impulses.¹⁶ But those benefits are not reflected in standard performance metrics and, therefore, authorizers are less likely to communicate them publicly.

Sidebar 2

Authorizing and State Accountability

As part of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), states are required to develop an accountability system to monitor and annually report metrics of school quality. Under the law, states' accountability systems must include certain standard performance metrics (e.g., results on state standardized testing in math and reading, the proficiency of English language learners, and high school graduation rates).

However, states can decide if their ESSA-compliant state accountability system applies to charter schools or not. States may use the state charter law and, by extension, the authorizer's accountability system — rather than the state-designed accountability system — to hold charter schools accountable for their performance.

As such, the degree to which a state's accountability system affects charter schools varies from state to state. Some states grant authorizers complete oversight responsibilities of charter schools. Others, however, require all schools, including charters, to abide by the state system. In the latter situation, charter schools are subject to two overlapping accountability systems: the state system and the system of their authorizer. State accountability systems may limit the degree to which authorizers can adapt their practices to nontraditional schools.

In the long term, authorizers' work on these challenges can benefit all nontraditional school models, charters or otherwise — particularly if they can secure a seat at the table as states design future iterations of their accountability systems.

Authorizers' Approaches to Nontraditional School Models

Throughout the authorizing levers and challenges described previously, three key themes emerge. First, authorizers often need more capacity, skills, or expertise to define, measure, and communicate the value of nontraditional models to families and the sector, especially when relying on standard measures of success. Second, authorizers have difficulty adapting, or choose not to adapt, standard practices to nontraditional models. As a result, nontraditional schools may not rate as well as traditional schools on performance metrics, site visit tools, and other standard rubrics. Finally, and following from the above, authorizers risk underestimating the quality of nontraditional schools, which can disproportionately affect families' perceptions of the schools, increase nontraditional schools' risk for closure, and decrease their ability to expand or replicate.

But some authorizers are taking steps to address these challenges. This section includes profiles of four such authorizers, and each approaches these challenges in different ways. Those authorizers are:

- **Colorado Charter Schools Institute (Colorado CSI)**
- **District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB)**
- **State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia (SCSC of Georgia)**
- **State University of New York Charter Schools Institute (SUNY CSI)**

These authorizers recognize the delicate balancing act that they are in. They are aware that standard practices may present challenges for nontraditional school models, but are also adamant that supporting nontraditional school models not come at the cost of strong accountability.

Colorado Charter Schools Institute (Colorado CSI)

Type of Authorizer	Independent Chartering Board (ICB)
Year Founded	2004
Jurisdiction	Colorado
Number of Schools	40 schools ¹⁷ (out of 250 charter schools in Colorado, or 16%) ¹⁸
Number of Students	18,275 ¹⁹ (out of 120,739 charter school students in Colorado, or 15%) ²⁰
Other Active Authorizers	45 school districts ²¹
Student Demographics of Portfolio	<p>Race/Ethnicity²²</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black or African American: 3.8% • Hispanic/Latino: 39.1% • White: 49.5% • Asian: 3.4% • American Indian or Alaskan: 0.5% • Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: 0.2% • Two or More Races: 3.6% <p>Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 38.1%²³</p> <p>English Language Learners: 17.4%²⁴</p>
Staff Size and Roles	26 staff members work across six teams, including student services, legal and policy, finance, evaluation and assessment, communications, and data submissions.
Board Governance and Oversight	A board of nine members governs Colorado CSI. The governor appoints seven members; the commissioner of education appoints two.

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.

Authorizing Practices to Support Nontraditional Schools

Application, Approval, and Chartering: Charter schools that apply to Colorado CSI set goals through the application process. Colorado CSI defines the parameters of these goals in its New School Application Template. Though they must use measurement tools identified by the Charter School Institute (e.g., the state assessment, the PSAT/SAT), schools can set their own annual targets for academic growth, academic achievement, academic growth gaps, postsecondary and workforce readiness, and targets for school-selected interim assessments. Schools may also include mission-specific measures.²⁵

Monitoring Reviews: Colorado CSI performs the CSI Annual Review of Schools (CARS) of all schools in its portfolio using a standard set of measures called the CSI Performance Framework. The CSI Performance Framework provides the minimum bar that all schools must meet in monitoring reviews and high-stakes reviews. Colorado CSI staff also perform model-specific supplemental analysis by interpreting the CSI Performance Framework data through the lens of that school's model. There is no formal rubric for this supplemental analysis; it relies upon the staff's familiarity and understanding of the various school models in its portfolio. For example, if an inquiry-based school scores lower on a certain standardized assessment, staff will acknowledge how the unique components of the model affect the student proficiency scores.

Schools also have the option to report out on other measures and data relevant to their mission in the CSI Annual Review of Schools. However, the additional data and information are not included in the school's overall CARS rating in the annual reviews, and so far no schools have opted into providing this information.

Mission-specific and Model-specific Metrics

Since early in the charter movement, authorizers have often allowed schools to create mission-specific metrics to measure their performance beyond the standard set of academic metrics. A school with a mission to develop students into engaged citizens, for example, might have a mission-specific metric around students' knowledge of civics or engagement in community service projects. These mission-specific metrics are tailored to an individual school's mission and vary accordingly.

Model-specific metrics may be best understood as a subset of mission-specific goals, which apply to a group of schools with similar school models. Dual language schools, for example, may have a variety of missions — fostering cultural awareness, for example, or preparing students for futures in international relations — but they share a model-specific metric around students' proficiency in a second language.

For the sake of clarity, we use “mission-specific metrics” throughout this report, except when discussing Colorado Charter Schools Institute's approach to authorizing nontraditional schools, which intentionally uses “model-specific metrics.”

High-Stakes Reviews: Through site visits, Colorado CSI seeks to understand the more qualitative aspects of school performance. Colorado CSI does not have standard protocols it uses on school site visits.²⁶ Instead, site visits are opportunities for school leaders to articulate and demonstrate their model and vision, highlighting ways in which they are working to improve outcomes for kids. In a site visit, authorizer staff look for evidence that the school is implementing its Unified Improvement Plan,²⁷ a list of improvement strategies, implementation benchmarks, and action steps that schools must develop as part of Colorado's state accountability law.

Soft Levers: Colorado CSI uses several soft levers to influence school quality. First, Colorado CSI supports moderate- and low-performing schools through the School Improvement Fellowship.²⁸ Through the fellowship, participants engage in a peer learning community with other school leaders and receive training, tools, and individualized coaching on organizational leadership and school improvement. The School Improvement Fellowship is model agnostic; it does not specifically target nontraditional schools and provides support that can catalyze improvement regardless of the school's design. But this approach has been successful with nontraditional school models that could use extra coaching as they pilot their models.

Annual equity reports offer schools ideas about ways to better serve subgroups of students who may underperform and are another soft lever for accountability. Separate from the public scores for Performance Framework results, recommendations from the equity reports are not attached to high-stakes reviews. Through equity reports, schools with unique models are able to find out if their model is only working for certain kids; this encourages schools to examine how they can improve educational outcomes for all of their students.

Finally, Colorado CSI communicates information about charter school quality to stakeholders. These communications include an interactive website where the public, including parents, can access information about schools' overall rating — ranging from “performance with distinction” to “turnaround” — as well as schools' performance against individual performance metrics. Unlike many other authorizers, Colorado CSI's website does indicate a school's model.²⁹ While a family would need to do some cross-referencing between website pages, the Colorado CSI website provides high-level information about school model and school quality to enable some useful comparisons. Stakeholders looking for additional information about the school's model or performance can also read through annual reports that are often 20 or more pages in length. Finally, Colorado CSI publishes an annual report that describes its portfolio of schools in aggregate. The report provides stakeholders with a summary of the school models and school quality ratings in Colorado CSI's portfolio and, in 2018, also provided a description of its evolving approach to accountability measures for nontraditional schools.³⁰



Voices of Authorizers

“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.”

“One of the things we've embraced, [in] a lot of authorization decisions...[is the] notion of professional judgment informed by data.”

DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB)

Type of Authorizer	Independent Chartering Board (ICB)
Year Founded	1996
Jurisdiction	Washington, D.C.
Number of Schools	62 local education agencies, which operate 123 campuses ³¹ (100% of charter schools in D.C.)
Number of Students	43,911 students (100% of charter school students in D.C.) ³²
Other Active Authorizers	None
Demographics of Portfolio ³³	<p>Race/Ethnicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black or African American: 73.6% • Hispanic/Latino: 16.3% • White: 6.4% • Asian: 1.1% • American Indian or Alaskan: 0.2% • Native Hawaiian or Other: 0.1% • Multiracial: 2.3% <p>Economically Disadvantaged: 77.0%</p> <p>English Language Learners: 7.5%</p>
Staff Size and Roles	<p>DC PCSB has more than 40 staff members organized into four departments: legal; communications; finance, operations, and strategic initiatives; and school performance. The school performance department consists of four teams with distinct focus areas: school reviews and charter amendments; accountability framework and financial oversight; compliance, equity indicators, and new school applications; and special populations, community complaints, and school audits.</p>
Board Governance and Oversight	DC PCSB is governed by a volunteer board of seven members who are appointed by the mayor with the advice and consent of the City Council.

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: Early Childhood, Elementary School, and Middle School; High School; Adult Education; and 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 that all schools, regardless of model, should be able to meet expectations of the PMF.

Authorizing Practices to Support Nontraditional Schools

Application, Approval, and Chartering: During the application process, a nontraditional school must meet the same standards as all applicants by demonstrating that its program is likely to result in academic success. However, DC PCSB recognizes that academic success could look different for a school serving alternative populations and works to customize that school's goals appropriately. For nontraditional school model applicants, DC PCSB has sought out external expertise to help evaluate applications. For instance, the staff asked an Arabic instruction expert to help evaluate a charter application for an Arabic dual language immersion school and uses Montessori experts to evaluate Montessori applications.

Charter school goals are set through the application and chartering process. Many schools, including nontraditional schools, are increasingly adopting the standard metrics outlined in the PMF as their goals. If schools believe the PMF metrics are a poor fit, they can add mission-specific goals and/or adopt different goals entirely. DC PCSB has found many schools are interested in adopting the PMF as their charter goals because of its simplicity and clarity. However, for the many schools interested in customized goals, DC PCSB will negotiate with schools to ensure additional or alternative goals are appropriately rigorous. These metrics are particularly important for the school and DC PCSB because, as discussed under "High-Stakes Reviews" below, schools can challenge nonrenewal or revocation decisions in the courts. DC PCSB therefore has a particularly strong interest in ensuring that all metrics are sufficiently valid and reliable to stand up in court.

Monitoring Reviews:³⁴ Regardless of whether the school adopts the PMF as the goals in its charter, DC PCSB uses PMFs in its annual assessments of school quality. The main considerations in the PMF are student progress and student achievement as measured by standardized test performance; college and career readiness; and school environment as measured by attendance and reenrollment rates. For schools that include pre-kindergarten, the PMF includes an additional measure of school environment: teacher interaction, as measured by the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).³⁵

Based on their performance on the PMF, schools are placed into tiers (listed in descending order): Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. Tier 3 schools are subject to closer monitoring, including additional Qualitative Site Reviews (discussed more under “High-Stakes Reviews” below) and potential closure.

DC PCSB is judicious in how it adapts monitoring reviews to nontraditional schools. For instance, schools have the option of including mission-specific metrics in their monitoring reviews and the resulting public-facing reports. However, those metrics are not factored into a school’s annual PMF score or its tier assignment. DC PCSB does, however, use school performance on reenrollment rates in its tier calculations; reenrollment is a rough proxy for parent satisfaction and, therefore, school quality. For nontraditional schools, reenrollment rates can be a particularly important way to communicate school quality beyond academic outcomes.

High-Stakes Reviews: DC PCSB evaluates schools for charter renewal every 15 years, but conducts a high-stakes review every five years. During these reviews, DC PCSB assesses the school against the goals written in its charter (which may include the metrics as defined by the PMF, mission-specific goals, and/or customized goals). Unlike monitoring reviews, which assess each individual school campus, DC PCSB conducts high-stakes reviews for all campuses operating under a single charter, considering the performance of each campus as well as their aggregate performance.

As part of high-stakes reviews, DC PCSB also conducts Qualitative Site Reviews (QSRs). Reviewers visit schools and observe a random sample of classrooms using the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching rubric to capture an overall picture of the school’s quality. The QSR results are reported publicly, and information from QSRs is also included in the monitoring reviews and renewal reports.³⁶ DC PCSB does not use alternative rubrics to assess instruction in schools with distinct instructional approaches, because it believes that the rubric it does use — Frameworks Two and Three of the Danielson Framework for Teaching — is equally relevant for almost any school. DC PCSB ensures it sends staff and consultants on the site reviews who are familiar with a particular school model.

Model Expansion: In order for a school to qualify for expansion, a school must achieve a Tier 1 rating, among other requirements.³⁷ DC PCSB holds to this bright line, to ensure that only the most exemplary schools are permitted to replicate.

Soft Levers: DC PCSB uses several soft levers of accountability. The DC PCSB holds meetings between the authorizing board and the board of an individual school as a soft lever (known colloquially as “board-to-boards”). In these board-to-board meetings, DC PCSB discusses items that may or may not have been included in the PMF but are an emerging area of concern. These meetings allow the authorizer to express concerns and discuss them candidly; they also allow nontraditional school leaders a chance to discuss any misalignment between standard performance measures and the school’s model.

School equity reports, another soft lever, may inform or trigger board-to-boards. The equity report captures how charter schools are performing on measures of educational equity, including discipline, attendance, and student mobility, broken out by subgroups.³⁸ DC PCSB’s equity reports are not used for formal accountability processes. Instead, they inform board-to-board discussions and help schools understand how they are serving different student subgroups and adjust as necessary.

DC PCSB also communicates with stakeholders about individual schools and the sector overall, fostering public accountability. At the school level, school quality reports include information from a school’s PMF evaluation and its assigned tier ranking.³⁹ As discussed earlier, though the PMF does not incorporate mission-specific goals into a school’s overall rating or tier assignment, the public-facing reports do include information about these goals. In addition, the published collection of school performance reports — the annual PMF,⁴⁰ the annual equity reports, qualitative site reviews,⁴¹ and five-year review and renewal reports⁴² — help inform parents’ decisions when choosing schools for their children and the public’s perceptions of individual charter schools across the District.

At the sector level, DC PCSB publishes an annual report that includes summary information about the performance of the charter sector, as well as a list of schools and some of each school’s distinguishing characteristics,⁴³ fostering awareness among policymakers and other stakeholders of the quality and diversity in the sector.



Voices of Authorizers

“Our standardized approaches to performance management, in combination with the customized way we do charter reviews, has not hindered the growth of nontraditional schools or hindered their success.”

State Charter Schools Commission of Georgia (SCSC of Georgia)

Type of Authorizer	Independent Chartering Board (ICB)
Year Founded	2012
Jurisdiction	Georgia
Number of Schools	33 schools (out of 110 charter schools in Georgia, or 30%) ⁴⁴
Number of Students	32,565 students ⁴⁵ (out of 77,318 charter school students in Georgia, or 42%) ⁴⁶
Other Active Authorizers	The Georgia Department of Education and seven school districts
Demographics of Portfolio ⁴⁷	<p>Race/Ethnicity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black or African American: 35.4% • Hispanic/Latino: 8.6% • White: 49% • Asian: 1.8% • Indian: 0.1% • Pacific: 0% • Multiracial: 4.2% <p>Special Education: 10.2%</p> <p>English Language Learners: 4.0%</p> <p>Free and Reduced-Lunch Eligibility: 51.9%</p>
Staff Size and Roles	Nine staff members, including an executive director, chief operations officer, associate general counsel, director of research and evaluation, and a financial accountability manager. ⁴⁸
Board Governance and Oversight	A board of seven governs the GA State Charter School Commission. The governor nominates three commissioners and the lieutenant governor and speaker of the house each nominate two. Commissioners are then appointed by the State Board of Education.

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.

Authorizing Practices to Support Nontraditional Schools

Application, Approval, and Chartering: Charter school goals are set through the application and chartering process, which the SCSC of Georgia has defined in its Comprehensive Performance Framework (CPF).⁴⁹ Charter contracts include these measures as a school's performance goals, regardless of school model. Schools can also opt to include mission-specific goals.

Monitoring Reviews: The SCSC of Georgia assesses the performance of a charter school based on its performance on six measures of academic performance: College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) Content Mastery,⁵⁰ CCRPI Progress, CCRPI Grade Band Score, CCRPI Single Score, Value-Added Impact⁵¹ on student achievement, and a "Beating the Odds"⁵² designation. As long as the school is outperforming the district on one of those six measures, the school is considered to have met academic standards.⁵³ Its scores across the indicators rolls up into an overall rating. The data collection required to assess schools against these measures is enabled by strategic partnerships with the Georgia Department of Education and the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, which provides the necessary data, and Georgia State University, which provides analytics.

In addition to these metrics, schools meet directly with the SCSC of Georgia board to talk about their performance and goals as part of their annual performance reviews.

Similar to the Colorado CSI's and DC PCSB's approaches, monitoring reviews indicate whether a school has met mission-specific goals, but doing so is considered a "bonus" and does not count toward the school's overall score on the CPF.

High-Stakes Reviews: The SCSC of Georgia reviews standard and mission-specific indicators of school quality during school renewal processes. In renewal decisions, the SCSC of Georgia prioritizes the standard measures of school quality, but may use mission-specific measures to inform its professional judgment. For instance, it may grant schools a shorter-term renewal if the school is only performing on par with its district counterpart but is excelling at mission-specific indicators. The SCSC of Georgia is unlikely to sanction a school that falls short of mission-specific measures, as long as it meets standard measures of school quality.

Model Expansion: Schools are only eligible for expansion if they are outperforming on an academic measure over multiple years. Beyond the flexibility already provided by having multiple measures of school performance, the SCSC of Georgia does not provide any special consideration for the expansion of nontraditional schools.

Soft Levers: If a school does not meet the mission-specific metrics outlined in its charter, the SCSC of Georgia has candid conversations about the school's original goals and proposed innovative features. In cases where the school's goals or proposed features do not reflect the school's model in reality, the SCSC of Georgia may work with schools to amend their charters to include goals that are more appropriate.

The SCSC of Georgia also fosters some public accountability by publishing annual reports summarizing schools' performance on the CPF. The reports provide summary ratings of school quality, as well as a deeper dive into individual metrics. They also include data on schools' progress toward mission-specific goals. Summary data of the SCSC of Georgia's portfolio of schools is presented annually at public meetings, available in a consolidated document of CPFs, and the Georgia Department of Education publishes an annual report that includes an overview of all charter schools throughout Georgia, including SCSC schools.



Voices of Authorizers

“We purposely went to partners to ask how we can hold schools accountable, taking into consideration unique populations and models.”

State University of New York Charter Schools Institute (SUNY CSI)

Type of Authorizer	Higher Education Institution
Year Founded	1998
Jurisdiction	New York State
Number of Schools	186 (out of 316 in New York State, or 59%) ⁵⁴
Number of Students	104,000 ⁵⁵ (out of 139,578 in New York State, or 75%) ⁵⁶
Other Active Authorizers	New York State Education Department, New York City Department of Education
Demographics of Portfolio	<p>Race/Ethnicity⁵⁷</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black: 56.8% • Hispanic/Latino: 32.2% • White: 5.5% • Asian or Pacific Islander: 2.9% • American Indian or Alaska Native: 1.2% • Two or More Races: 1.4% <p>Economically disadvantaged: 80%⁵⁸</p> <p>English language learners: 6%⁵⁹</p>
Staff Size and Roles	26 staff members in several teams, including accountability, evaluation, and performance and systems; legal; best practices and partnerships; new charters; operations; information and technology; and administration.
Board Governance and Oversight	The SUNY CSI is governed by the SUNY Board of Trustees. There are 18 trustees, 15 of whom are appointed by the governor with the consent of the Senate. In addition, three other trustees include the president of the Student Assembly, who is a voting member; and the president of the University Faculty Senate and the president of the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, who are not voting members.

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. SUNY CSI also 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.

Authorizing Practices to Support Nontraditional Schools

Application, Approval, and Chartering: Charter school goals are set in the charter application, which SUNY CSI outlines in its school Accountability Plan guidelines. SUNY CSI uses these standard measures of school quality in contracts, annual performance reviews, and renewal decisions. SUNY CSI permits mission-specific indicators of school quality to complement this standard set of measures.⁶⁰ However, given the challenges identifying valid and reliable mission-specific indicators, SUNY CSI has veered away from encouraging their use.

Monitoring Reviews: Schools in its portfolio must complete annual reports and submit them to SUNY CSI; reports are subsequently published on the authorizer website. These reports include schools' progress against the measures in the Accountability Plan. Where applicable, these reports include schools' performance against mission-specific goals. In addition, these annual reports provide schools with significant space in which to describe the design elements of their school model and discuss the results of student assessments.

High-Stakes Reviews: In high-stakes reviews, which typically occur every five years, SUNY CSI uses a mixed-methods approach. It combines student- and school-level performance data with a more comprehensive understanding of the school's context and quality, codified as Renewal Benchmarks, including curriculum, pedagogy, and instructional leadership. Rather than require schools to meet a certain threshold on a point system, SUNY CSI weights benchmarks differently based on a school's circumstances. This approach allows it to use its discretion to ensure the decision is appropriate for the school.⁶¹

In addition to reviewing the school's performance against its goals, SUNY CSI conducts site visits as part of high-stakes reviews. Site visits can provide important context for judgment calls when schools are on the cusp of non-renewal. For instance, SUNY CSI can use its flexibility on renewal decisions for a school that has strong high school graduation measures even if 10th-grade proficiency scores are a bit low. Or, for a school that needs a bit more lead time to set up unique aspects of its model (e.g., an internship program), SUNY CSI can renew the school for three years instead of five.

Soft Levers: SUNY CSI has some soft levers of accountability at its disposal, including informal conversations with school leaders and school board members, which it can use to communicate a concern or better understand the context in which a school is operating. In addition, SUNY CSI communicates with stakeholders about school quality, primarily by publishing schools' annual reports (alongside other reports) in a searchable database on its website. The reports provide a substantial amount of data to the public, which is likely most valuable for policymakers or researchers willing to parse lengthy documents. (Parents and families are likely to rely on data provided on the New York State Education Department website, which is more user-friendly but does not include charter schools' performance against their charter goals.)

A project in the works, called "Active Ingredients," aims to offer valuable alternatives for measuring school performance to the benefit of the larger field. While the work is not yet a lever for accountability, SUNY CSI is leading a consortium of six authorizers around the country to identify, refine, and pilot non-academic measures of student performance. The Active Ingredients project seeks to develop tools and resources to support schools in reporting a broader range of student capacities. Research suggests, for example, that strong social-emotional learning skills can have positive effects on long-term student outcome measures.⁶² Valid measures of social-emotional learning could help inform how authorizers understand school quality. This work is in relatively early stages: SUNY CSI has developed some preliminary metrics and is piloting them with three schools during the 2019-20 school year.



Voices of Authorizers

"I think people see that if we give you a charter, we want you to be super successful. We're not going to tell you how to teach math but, to the extent that we can, we create an environment where you can be successful."

School Leaders' Perspectives

More than two dozen leaders of nontraditional schools offered their insights on these issues, about half of whom were in the portfolios of the authorizers highlighted here. Despite some persistent challenges, school leaders valued their authorizers' willingness to discuss and understand how distinct aspects of their school model could or should inform oversight and accountability. They elevated several positive experiences:

- 1** Authorizers and schools shared a commitment to ensuring basic levels of school quality, measured through performance and operational health metrics, regardless of school model
- 2** School leaders enjoyed strong relationships with authorizers, facilitated by open communication, long-standing relationships, and authorizer "steadiness" (that is, authorizers committed to an accountability strategy and avoided frequent and radical adjustments)
- 3** Authorizers' approach to nontraditional schools, and accountability overall, was grounded in a sense of helping schools thrive rather than a punitive "gotcha"

Patterns Among Authorizers' Approaches

The authorizers profiled here approach nontraditional schools in different ways, but there are several patterns that offer key lessons for other authorizers grappling with how to approach nontraditional schools, as well as others in the field that are interested in fostering a sector of diverse, high-quality schools.

Authorizers do not want performance standards to discourage nontraditional school models, but all are adamant that schools must meet basic standards of quality to open and operate.

The authorizers each start from the assumption that all charter schools serving traditional student populations should be able to demonstrate strong performance on basic academic measures, regardless of the model they operate. At the same time, however, these authorizers recognize that the standard indicators used to measure academic performance may not be well-suited for nontraditional models. To that end, these authorizers complement their standard measures of academic performance with opportunities for schools to demonstrate academic quality in other ways.

The authorizers' approaches to complementary measures are all different. The SCSC of Georgia's multiple measure approach, for example, sets the same academic standards for all schools in its portfolio, but those metrics are flexible enough to provide opportunities for nontraditional schools to demonstrate quality in multiple ways.

And SUNY CSI and Colorado CSI also believe that the existing academic metrics are adequate for establishing whether nontraditional models meet baseline standards, but additional measures could better reflect the unique value proposition that a school offers. They rely heavily on their professional judgment, informed by quantitative and qualitative data, to make recommendations and decisions. And both authorizers are working to complement their core set of standardized performance metrics with other, often mission- or model-specific, indicators.

Importantly, neither authorizer would be willing to keep a school open if it is not meeting baseline academic standards, regardless of its model; a school's performance on the standard academic measures supersedes any other goal or indicator. But SUNY CSI and Colorado CSI's approach acknowledges that there are additional factors that must be considered in order to understand the complete picture of school performance and act accordingly. SUNY CSI's Active Ingredients work is a good example, and may eventually help capture how schools prepare students for long-term success. These additional contextual factors can be particularly important when a nontraditional school is on the cusp during high-stakes reviews.

Authorizers can exercise professional judgment in their decision-making, and use discretion to determine what is best for students, schools, and their portfolio.

The authorizers profiled here have transparent standards and metrics for assessing school quality and making high-stakes decisions about schools. At the same time — reflecting recommendations from NACSA's Quality Practice Project⁶³ — their decision-making is not chained to a tally of points from a rubric or framework. Each authorizer thoughtfully and intentionally complements data on school performance with information about the school's model, context, and other factors not captured in the standard performance metrics. Taken together, this suite of data allows authorizers to insert their expertise and knowledge of their portfolio into decisions and ensures that they are fostering schools and an overall portfolio that best serves children and families.

The SCSC of Georgia, for example, has room for some subjectivity in making judgment calls about schools, particularly if it believes the school's true value may not be captured in the standard performance metrics. Colorado CSI takes a similar approach; it embraces the fact that its approach to measuring school quality is imperfect and evolving, and leverages its professional judgment if it believes it is at risk of closing a valuable school based on incomplete information. DC PCSB uses standard performance and equity report data to identify potential board-to-board conversations, but uses its discretion to determine the tone of the conversation, or whether the conversation is necessary at all. And SUNY CSI may tailor its decisions to the school's context; the authorizer may decide, for example, that while a school has met the standards, its performance may only warrant a 3-year, rather than standard 5-year, renewal contract.

It's important to note that while authorizers have discretion in their decision-making, they remain within the bounds defined by the state charter law and the predefined authorizing standards. But neither are they mindlessly abiding by a framework to determine the future of schools.

When authorizers have nontraditional schools in their portfolios, they have a vested interest in those schools' success.

The authorizers profiled here make decisions and provide supports that clearly signal their vested interest in ensuring schools in their portfolios are successful. Specifically, authorizers seek to “let schools shine” through intentionally granting model-specific flexibility and seeking out model-specific information and context in the formal and informal authorizing levers available to them.

For example, if a school is meeting its core academic goals but is not meeting mission- or model-specific goals, these authorizers will generally not close the school unless it is required by law to do so (as DC PCSB is at the 15-year mark). That's not to say poor performance on these indicators has no consequences. As mentioned, for example, SUNY CSI may decide to renew a school, but may grant it a shorter contract.

These authorizers often use soft levers of accountability to head off issues prior to high-stakes reviews. DC PCSB has its board-to-boards, and the SCSC of Georgia has similarly candid conversations. If a school is faltering on its mission-specific metrics, DC PCSB and the SCSC of Georgia try to understand whether the school is truly operating the model that they identified in their charter and if the goals and indicators they're using to measure progress on that model are the right ones. If that's not the case, they may file a charter amendment to revise the school's mission-specific metrics to more accurately reflect the value proposition of the school, which they then use to inform high-stakes review decisions.

Colorado CSI employs similar strategies. Its priority is creating a set of authorizing practices that provides the most accurate and comprehensive information about school performance. To that end, Colorado CSI works directly with schools to understand how schools measure their model and support them to do so more effectively; this understanding is often informed by the authorizer's site visits, which are part of its high-stakes reviews. Rather than using a specific tool for site visits, Colorado CSI recently revised its site visit protocols to be model-agnostic (that is, to not be tailored to or benefit any specific model) and instead evaluate schools based on the school's priorities, rather than the authorizer's priorities.

Through these strategies, authorizers hold schools accountable for their performance while allowing them to highlight other aspects of their model. This multifaceted approach to accountability gives authorizers and schools the opportunity to collaborate on their performance on model- or mission-specific indicators outside of the context of high-stakes decisions, which is particularly beneficial for nontraditional school models that may require

additional time or context for an authorizer to fully understand. Indeed, this approach creates an authorizing environment more conducive to nontraditional models in that it communicates to prospective nontraditional schools that the authorizer makes decisions in context, is interested in innovative models, and is willing to partner closely with schools to implement them and measure their success with fidelity – without getting into the business of prescribing what a school model should look like.

Tailored approaches to nontraditional models require increased capacity within the authorizer.

Authorizers' capacity requirements differ based on their respective approaches to nontraditional models; the more tailored or flexible the approach, the more capacity it requires. Additionally, authorizers may take on the responsibilities of many different roles – for example, they may be the fiscal agent or administrative unit for charter schools, as well as their authorizer. The authorizers profiled here have attempted to build out their capacity to authorize schools effectively through investments in their internal teams and through working with external partners. Notably, the authorizers profiled here and that have dedicated time and resources to these questions are also authorizers with significant resources. Meanwhile, about 670 authorizers – 67% of all authorizers – oversee just one or two schools⁶⁴ and often operate with much fewer financial resources.

Generally, authorizers' capacity needs fall in two buckets: expertise to set appropriate and accurate goals and corresponding metrics, and ability to assess school performance on those goals and metrics.

1 Expertise to Set Appropriate Goals and Corresponding Metrics

In order to set appropriate goals and corresponding metrics that accurately and comprehensively measure a school's performance, authorizers need a deep understanding of children's overall developmental trajectory, as well as what that trajectory looks like in the context of a specific school model. In a Waldorf school, for example, children don't begin learning to read until later than in traditional school models, often not until age 6-7. An authorizer must know how to set a reading/ELA performance goal for that school given that context. Should all Waldorf schools have a lower target score for third-grade reading? At what point should an authorizer expect Waldorf schools' reading/ELA scores to catch up to traditional schools? Authorizers must have the right expertise – or, alternatively, have external partners with this expertise – to make these decisions in a fair and appropriate way.

2 Ability to Assess School Performance on those Goals and Metrics

A foundational component of an authorizer’s ability to assess school performance is access to high-quality data on indicators of interest. In a technical respect, access to data is often a challenge for authorizers. Data on students’ postsecondary outcomes, for example, which would be particularly relevant for job-training, internship, or competency-based school models, are not consistently collected by states. They rarely connect students who attended a specific school to their postsecondary outcomes, and are sometimes only accessible to those who can pay for them.⁶⁵ An authorizer’s access to a comprehensive set of data can make or break its ability to more holistically measure school performance.

An authorizer’s ability to assess school performance may be further complicated if the measurement tool is not valid for that specific model. There are two components to this challenge. In some cases, the favored standardized assessments, such as PARCC, do not measure all important elements of children’s development, particularly as defined by nontraditional schools. In other cases, an authorizer that is committed to measuring learning outcomes aligned to a nontraditional model may find it difficult to identify valid measurement tools for those outcomes.

Authorizers may also be stymied if they lack the ability to conduct the complex analyses necessary to measure performance. An approach to measuring performance like the SCSC of Georgia’s Value-Added Model, which requires extensive data and predictive modeling, would not be possible without its access to data provided through the state’s robust longitudinal data system and partnership with Georgia State University to carry out the analyses. This approach allows the SCSC of Georgia to invest resources elsewhere. It also gives credibility to the assessment, since it is conducted by a trusted third party.

Finally, authorizers that pursue tailored approaches must ensure they have enough people power to implement their approach. A standardized framework is by definition one-size-fits-all, and therefore can be relatively easily applied across all schools once the start-up investment is complete. But a more tailored approach comes with more obligations — additional measures, analyses, site visits, expert interviews, partner engagement, reports — that require more time and funding. This also, of course, raises questions about the resources and capacity that authorizers can reasonably expect, especially given the vast array of current and potential future nontraditional models.

The burden of building a case for a nontraditional school model often falls on school leaders.

As discussed, each of the authorizers profiled here is open to nontraditional school models. At the same time, however, these authorizers may still be hesitant to approve nontraditional schools or to deviate from their standard approach to better accommodate nontraditional models.

There are a myriad of reasons why authorizers may hesitate – they may have limited knowledge of nontraditional models, be restricted by political context, have concerns about school effectiveness, or worry that they do not have the capacity or expertise to oversee these schools well. To alleviate these concerns, the authorizers require nontraditional schools to show that their model is research-based and viable, and that any proposed alternative or complementary metrics are valid and reliable.

To be sure, it is best practice to require all schools – nontraditional or otherwise – to demonstrate their ability to deliver a high-quality education. And if the standard metrics aren't right for a specific model, school leaders should have ways of measuring whether they are producing the outcomes they want for children and if they are executing with fidelity the key model components that they expect to lead to desired outcomes.

But even so, these standard practices place the onus on school founders and leaders to demonstrate that they will be able to meet performance metrics, or some other comparable metric. And that burden is particularly heavy for nontraditional schools, with whom authorizers are less familiar, when there is a limited track record of the model's success, where the research base for a school's instructional model is less robust, and/or there are few established options for alternative metrics or measurement tools. Schools must invest time and resources into building a robust defense of their model, justifying the need for new metrics, and identifying or developing those metrics. Together, these additional burdens can incentivize schools to take the path of least resistance – that is, to abide by the standard authorizing levers – which can in turn disincentivize schools from operating nontraditional models or prevent them from performing to their fullest potential.

The authorizers profiled here attempt to alleviate this particular burden on nontraditional schools. The SCSC of Georgia has already defined a set of alternative academic metrics; Colorado CSI supports schools in co-developing metrics; and SUNY CSI's Active Ingredients work is explicitly designed to build a repository of potential metrics. But for the vast majority of authorizers, the leaders of nontraditional schools continue to be responsible for making the case for their model, and the metrics used to assess it.

Recommendations

The challenge of balancing the diversity of school models with consistent standards of school quality has no easy answers. Authorizers will never compile a complete list of perfect measures, not least because schools will continue to evolve and innovate. However, there are steps that school leaders, authorizers, funders, charter support organizations, and policymakers can do to ensure they evolve thoughtfully — and that they continue to support a diversity of high-quality school options for all families.

Recommendations for Authorizers of Nontraditional Schools

Our analysis identifies several steps that authorizers can take to balance flexibility and accountability, but it's necessary to acknowledge that authorizers vary considerably in their structures, capacity, and approach. Authorizers' responsibilities vary, as well; in addition to managing school quality, authorizers often serve as fiscal agents and ensure compliance with federal and state law. These differences mean that not all authorizers should take the same approach to nontraditional schools. It is not practical, for example, for a small authorizer that oversees two charter schools and has no dedicated authorizing staff to implement the same policies and practices as the DC Public Charter School Board, which has over 40 staff members to oversee more than 120 campuses.

There are some steps that all authorizers can and should take to support a diversity of high-quality school options. However, many of these steps require significant capacity and expertise. Ideally, *every authorizer* would have the capacity to adopt our recommendations, and sector support organizations like NACSA can advance this work across the sector. But in lieu of the ideal, it is important that *at least one authorizer* in every jurisdiction has the necessary capacity and expertise to oversee nontraditional schools.

Work to augment the expertise of their staff and their governing boards. Building authorizer expertise has the potential to improve every lever of accountability. In reviewing a charter application, for instance, an authorizer may contract with experts in various school models to help assess the strength of their program designs. This may include hiring an expert in inquiry-based schooling to evaluate a proposal for a Montessori charter school or hiring a Spanish-language expert to conduct site visits of a Spanish-immersion program. In some cases, these experts can also help educate the authorizer’s governing board about the school models, softening the ground for when board members are asked to approve the staff’s recommendations.

Signal to the field that they are interested in and welcoming of nontraditional school models. By communicating with potential school founders about their philosophy and approach to supporting nontraditional schools, authorizers can help mitigate the risk that school leaders opt out of applying for a charter because they believe they have a slim chance of approval. Signals could include authorizer-sponsored research on the demand for different school models in the community or an explanation of authorizers’ priorities in new school application templates. Moreover, in a sector with multiple authorizers, with varying capacity and expertise to oversee nontraditional schools, this signaling can also help school founders find the authorizers that are best positioned to work with them.

Build relationships with the leaders of nontraditional schools. This can apply to all authorizers. Ongoing investments in these relationships will help establish trust and credibility between the two parties, and lay the foundation for navigating any challenges that arise. Too often, authorizers and school leaders only communicate when there is an emergent issue. Authorizers that invest early and often in building relationships with nontraditional schools will find that, when challenges do arise, the parties know and trust each other enough to collaborate on a path forward.

Work with experts and leaders of approved nontraditional schools to ensure suitable metrics of success for the performance contract. There are pros and cons to developing alternative performance metrics for nontraditional schools, but if an authorizer decides to pursue this option, it should partner with experts in measurement and evaluation to ensure the metrics are not only meaningful reflections of the school’s distinct features but also rely on data that are attainable, valid, and reliable. Where possible, authorizers should leverage experts in the school model to ensure measures are grounded in the research that underpins the theory and evidence of the model’s effectiveness.

Augment analysis with additional information, especially from the school community.

Especially for schools that are on the cusp, authorizers may benefit from using additional indicators of school quality, including measures of family demand and satisfaction, when making high-stakes decisions for approval, renewal, and expansion. For instance, if the school model provides a unique program for cultural heritage (e.g., African American or American Indian culture) and parents demonstrate strong attachment and dedication to the school, this may tilt a marginal decision toward renewal or expansion. Conversely, if a school demonstrates weak parent satisfaction and receives numerous complaints, that could point an authorizer in the opposite direction.

Be aware of the potential for unconscious bias to affect their analysis and perspective.

Much of what authorizers can do to support nontraditional charter schools requires them to exercise professional judgment alongside hard data or standard rubrics. Authorizing staff should self-reflect on whether they have an implicit preference for different school models, and/or take extra care to ensure that they are not influenced by the age, gender, race, or ethnicity of school leaders, families, or students.

Consider how to communicate with families, oversight entities, and other stakeholders about the school model alongside school quality.

Regardless of political context, stakeholder communication is essential and must be tailored for various audiences. First and foremost, authorizers must carefully convey to families, communities, oversight entities, and policymakers the *importance* of having a diversity of school models. For families, authorizers must work with school leaders to define the school models, what families and students should expect them to look like, and how they are distinct from other schools. To oversight entities and policymakers, authorizers must also convey community demand for nontraditional models, the research basis for these models, if/how the performance of nontraditional schools will be measured differently than other schools in the authorizer's portfolio, and how the authorizer arrived at metrics that it believes are flexible, but nonetheless rigorous. These communications should happen as frequently as the authorizer communicates with the public about the quality of schools in its portfolio. With school leader support, authorizers should also consider less formal, more accessible, and more frequent avenues of communication — such as social media — to share information with families.

Seek a seat at the table when it comes to designing state accountability systems.

Authorizers of nontraditional schools should share lessons learned with the broader education community. Charter school authorizers have a unique opportunity to lead the field on how policymakers envision and codify measures of school quality. In fact, just as charter schools were meant to drive innovation in school models, authorizers can drive innovation in school oversight. As authorizers wrestle with the tension between diverse school models and accountability, they can experiment with different approaches, forge partnerships with school leaders, foster the development of valid and reliable metrics, and communicate lessons to policymakers and the public. Charter authorizers could offer an invaluable perspective on the next generation of state accountability systems.

Recommendations for Leaders of Nontraditional Schools

Build relationships with their authorizer. One of the most impactful strategies that leaders of nontraditional schools can pursue is to proactively develop relationships and actively engage with their authorizer, to share information that ultimately builds authorizers' understanding of nontraditional school models. Mirroring the need for authorizers to build relationships with the leaders of nontraditional schools, school leaders must reciprocate. These relationships build trust and can help the parties collaborate when challenges arise, and provide a foundation for the other steps school leaders can take.

Quantify and communicate family demand for nontraditional models. To make the case for a nontraditional school during the application, review, and contracting process, school leaders should include data-backed evidence of community demand for their particular school model — and how the current portfolio of schools does not meet that demand. Documenting this gap can prompt authorizers to take a closer look at a nontraditional school model, when they might otherwise dismiss it as unfamiliar or risky.

Invest in educating authorizers about your school model. Regardless of whether or how well an authorizer's accountability levers account for the distinct elements of a school's model, school leaders should invest time and energy to reach out to authorizing staff to discuss it. Authorizing staff typically have room for judgment on how they implement some authorizing processes and standards, and by educating the authorizer about the model, school leaders can help ensure that authorizers' judgment calls are informed. To the extent that school leaders can point to external validators of their model (e.g., through academic research, examples of other successful schools using the same approach, or the endorsement of well-regarded organizations that support particular school models), efforts to educate authorizers will be even more effective. This can be particularly important in the early stages of developing and launching a nontraditional charter school.

Anticipate potential pain points and proactively reach out to authorizers if adjustments are necessary. As described throughout this report, there are ways in which authorizers can adjust accountability levers. However, authorizers often lack the knowledge or capacity to anticipate when those adjustments are necessary, and school leaders may need to take the lead. School leaders can build trust with authorizers and reduce friction by reaching out to authorizers when they see a potential misalignment or expect an adjustment is necessary. For instance, a dual language immersion school may anticipate that a site visit will be more productive if the authorizer's team includes someone proficient in the school's second language. Proactively suggesting adjustments and potential solutions in advance will set the authorizer up for success and will reduce the likelihood of needing to litigate findings after decisions have already been made.

Develop measures of program quality and communicate them to their authorizer.

Following from the recommendation above, if the leader of a nontraditional school anticipates misalignment with the authorizer’s standard measures of school quality, they should invest in developing or adopting valid and reliable ways for measuring how their school’s distinct features affect outcomes. These measures can help in at least three ways: enable school leaders to communicate the logic behind their school model, help them measure and demonstrate progress over time, and assuage authorizer concerns that the school is trying to “game the system” with paeans to how innovative models belie accountability altogether. Of course, performing well on the authorizer’s standard metrics also goes a long way to building credibility. School leaders should consider whether and when to share these measures with their authorizers, depending on their relationship with the authorizer and their authorizer’s willingness to refine the metrics over time. If and when a school and its authorizer begin to discuss alternative accountability metrics, the metrics that the school has used to internally monitor its progress could serve as prototypes of external measures of school quality. The development of alternative metrics, of course, requires additional resources; see recommendations for funders below.

Build relationships with leaders of other nontraditional school models. Identifying and collaborating with the leaders of other nontraditional schools can have a high return on investment. School leaders who work together may identify best practices and pattern recognition for what works (and what doesn’t) when it comes to navigating various levers in the authorizing cycle. Moreover, and especially for more common nontraditional models such as Montessori or dual language immersion schools, school leaders with similar models can work together to identify and codify alternative measures of school success rather than continuously reinventing the wheel. It may not be possible or preferable to have alternative measures that apply to all Montessori schools or all dual language immersion schools but, at the very least, it may be helpful for authorizers to hear the same message from multiple stakeholders.

Recommendations for Funders and Other Sector Support Organizations

Funders and charter support organizations should define their risk tolerance for nontraditional schools, and lend their support accordingly. Up-front conversations about the risks and rewards of nontraditional schools will help set the barometer for how and where to target resources. For instance, if a funder is worried about the politics of a charter sector with mediocre school quality, and the legislature is getting ready to pass a moratorium, the funder needs to consider whether nontraditional schools will help or hinder their work and what the downside risks might be of “rocking the boat” on accountability. If a charter support organization has the resources to incubate new schools, but the sector is already saturated with more traditional models, the incubator may choose to invest in other nontraditional, in-demand models — even if doing so means it can support fewer schools and/or must tolerate higher risk. Fundamentally, funders and charter support organizations need not take an all-or-nothing approach to nontraditional schools, but should intentionally work to align their portfolios to their relative tolerance for risk and uncertainty.

Support research and development of nontraditional school models. Historically, much of philanthropic funding for charter schools has supported school start-up and replication, covering the cost of facilities, materials, and staff. But if a nontraditional school is going to be effective, it also needs funding to hone its model through early-stage research and development. Particularly for schools that question assumptions about the purpose and structure of education, financial support is crucial to developing new school models that effectively serve students. Funders should identify opportunities to support promising nontraditional models at each stage of a school’s trajectory — from initial development of nontraditional schools through their sustained continuous improvement.

Leverage existing networks and resources. Outside the charter sector, there are many organizations dedicated to supporting the high-quality implementation of nontraditional models. For instance, the American Montessori Society, the Association Montessori International/USA, and the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector support the implementation of the Montessori model; Trust for Learning supports schools implementing child-centered learning; the Association of Two-Way & Dual Language Education and DC Language Immersion Project support language-immersion and multilingual education programs; and the Clayton Christensen Institute, CompetencyWorks, and the Learning Accelerator support competency-based learning. Whenever possible, funders and charter support organizations should build on the great work these organizations have already done, and leverage their expertise and networks to support the implementation of these models in the charter sector.

Explore whether third-party accreditation could serve as a meaningful and enforceable complement to standard authorizing. In some cases, the expertise of third-party organizations that accredit specific school models could potentially be a helpful complement to authorizers' work. In fact, Washington, D.C.'s School Reform Act of 1995 specifically requires charter schools to seek accreditation and names several Montessori accrediting agencies as options. However, school accreditation can be based more on inputs to a school model than the outcomes they achieve (the antithesis of the charter's autonomy-for-accountability bargain). More research on accrediting agencies is necessary before they are considered a potential partner in charter school accountability.⁶⁶ Funders and charter support organizations could dedicate resources to help explore the potential of this option.

Invest in the development of alternative measures of school quality. Again, there are pros and cons to alternative measures for both school leaders and authorizers, but these metrics continue to be elevated as a potential solution for nontraditional models. Schools that want to pursue them should be able to do so. To that end, school leaders and authorizers will need expertise and capacity to develop alternative measures, and funders and other charter support organizations are well-positioned to help. Funders are positioned to make an up-front investment in alternative metrics, and charter support organizations could facilitate researchers and evaluation experts to develop those metrics in partnership with authorizers and school leaders. Moreover, funders and charter support organizations are better positioned than individual authorizers or individual school leaders to disseminate alternative metrics for use and refinement across the national charter school sector. Funders should carefully consider the timing of these investments; supporting schools with alternative metrics during incubation, before they define performance goals in their charter contracts, is particularly important.

Foster professional networks in which school leaders and authorizers can learn from each other. It would be a missed opportunity if authorizers and school leaders did not have a forum in which to share best practices and lessons learned. For instance, school leaders could benefit from a community of practice with others who have worked to communicate the value of their model to their authorizers, especially if their models are similar. Conversely, authorizers would benefit from knowing if another authorizer had worked with experts in measurement and evaluation to develop valid and reliable measures to capture the distinct value of a particular nontraditional model. Repositories of shared resources for school leaders and authorizers would help those in the sector build on each other's work. It could also inform accountability for district schools pursuing new models.

Recommendations for Policymakers

Ensure that each jurisdiction has access to at least one authorizer with sufficient financial resources, capacity, and expertise to do this work well. It is unrealistic for all authorizers to design and implement thoughtful and thorough approaches to the oversight of all nontraditional schools, but it is important that a school founder in any given charter sector has access to at least one. Policymakers should ensure that every state has at least one statewide authorizer, whether housed at a university or operating as an independent entity, with the resources necessary to do this work well.

Ensure authorizers with strong records of effectiveness have flexibility to exercise professional judgment. Similar to NACSA's findings in its Quality Practice Project, the oversight of nontraditional schools often requires authorizers to exercise professional judgment. However, some state charter policies can constrain the decisions that authorizers make or the data they can use to inform those decisions. For example, D.C.'s charter school law requires DC PCSB to close a charter school after 15 years if it has not met the performance metrics in its charter contract. Moreover, it is also the case that many charter schools are subject to state accountability systems (among other statutory requirements), in addition to the requirements of their authorizer. Policymakers should ensure that authorizers have flexibility in key authorizing decisions, and that measures of success developed by authorizers and nontraditional schools are not superseded by the blunter instruments of state accountability.

Make sure that charter authorizers have a seat at the table in discussions of state accountability systems. Policymakers have visibility into charter school and state accountability systems, and are therefore uniquely well-positioned to ensure that those with experience overseeing nontraditional schools have the opportunity to provide input as state systems navigate similar challenges in measuring the quality of all schools.

Conclusion

Authorizers' responsibilities to foster diverse school models and ensure school quality confront them with enduring, and perhaps unresolvable, tensions. In a country as large and diverse as ours, authorizers must foster a variety of options that are responsive to evolving needs and preferences of families. And they must do so while protecting families — especially the most vulnerable families — from the consequences of ineffective schools.

Doing so requires authorizers to wrestle with the very definition of school quality. What is it? Who defines it? Can we measure it, and if so, how?

A perfect approach, perfectly executed, is unattainable. Inevitably, some promising school models will struggle to gain admission to the charter sector; some families will enroll in schools that fall short. But an intentional approach — one that continuously interrogates past practices and evolves in response to new information — can help authorizers maximize the benefits of a diverse charter sector, while minimizing the risks.

Moreover, the conditions that provide for a diversity of high-quality options may not be too far off from those that allow visionary leaders to pilot and iterate on entirely new approaches to instruction, challenging established practices and reimagining schooling in new and exciting ways. For the charter sector to foster diverse, high-quality school options — and a continuous cycle of innovation — it is essential that authorizers engage thoughtfully in these messy, complex, and constantly evolving issues.

Authorizers are uniquely positioned to do so. As they continue to evolve their approaches to school accountability, they can embrace their own role as innovators – surfacing insights and lessons that not only influence the charter sector, but inform sector-wide debates. Doing so holds enormous opportunity for the charter sector, for public schools, and for students and families.

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About Bellwether Education Partners

Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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