The National Association of Charter School Authorizer’s
Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing

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INTRODUCTION
The role of the charter school authorizer is relatively new to public education. In the first
decade of charter schools, authorizers have accumulated important experience and
understanding of what makes for quality authorizing. To share this expertise, the
National Association for Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has adopted Principles
and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing.

As the professional membership organization representing leading authorizers across
the country, NACSA is committed to increasing the number of quality charter schools. A
quality charter school is characterized by high student achievement, financial
stewardship, and responsible school governance.

Students deserve outstanding public schools. Nationally, the demand for charter
schools far exceeds supply. As more charter schools are created, these Principles and
Standards will guide authorizer practices to ensure that the autonomy of charter schools
is honored and that charter schools are held accountable for high student achievement.

What are the Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing?
The Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing reflect the lessons
learned by experienced authorizers. The Principles articulate a set of beliefs about
quality charter school authorizing. The Standards identify core authorizer responsibilities
and describe how the principles are upheld within each core responsibility. Together,
the Principles and Standards create a framework for authorizer practice and highlight the
importance of effective authorizing for the overall quality of the charter school initiative.
This effort builds on NACSA’s prior work under the Critical Design Issues, Illustrations
and Case Studies for Charter School Authorizers, which identified a set of activities and
practical choices associated with a comprehensive approach to charter school
authorizing.

It is important to qualify the purpose of this document by stating not only what it is but
also what it is not. The Principles and Standards do not prescribe an exclusive
approach to charter school authorizing. They are intended to focus on the ends that
authorizers should be aiming to attain, recognizing that there are many means of getting
there. Moreover, NACSA recognizes that authorizers operate under various legal,
financial and other constraints that may limit how they operate and what they do.
Nevertheless, the Principles and Standards assert the authorizer’s role in creating and
upholding high expectations for the schools they charter.

How do the Principles and Standards promote quality charter schools?

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NACSA strives to promote quality charter schools and seeks to foster quality authorizing practices as a mechanism for doing so. The Principles and Standards can help current authorizers reflect on their practices, understand the strengths and weaknesses of these practices, and initiate ongoing improvement. For agencies considering authorizing, the Principles and Standards can be a tool for understanding the complexities of chartering and determining how to prepare their organizations for this work. In sum, the Principles and Standards will strengthen the practices of charter school authorizers that, in turn, will enhance charter school quality and student performance.

We present the Principles and Standards in two parts. The first is a preamble that identifies NACSA’s Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing. The preamble is followed by five Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing that identify the core authorizer responsibilities and describe how these responsibilities are carried out in practice and, ultimately, uphold the principles.
PREAMBLE

Charter school authorizers embody a new governance role in public education. It is one characterized by the granting and oversight of performance contracts or “charters” that provide autonomy in exchange for accountability. This new relationship is designed to give those closest to the educational process substantial authority over decisions that are essential to making schools perform well.

In return for operational autonomy, charter schools promise to be accountable to high academic and organizational performance. Parents and students make individual accountability real through the decisions they make about whether to enroll in and continue to attend a school. The authorizer makes school-wide and public accountability real by ensuring that a charter school’s performance, as a whole, measures up to the terms of the charter.

Charter school authorizer responsibilities are challenging and can sometimes conflict. Authorizers may guide and mentor schools in their development and then have to make the tough calls in assessing school quality. They may be strong advocates for the charter school concept while being demanding critics of individual school performance. Moreover, the scope of the authorizer’s activity and the availability of resources to support this work are state-specific and vary widely. Yet, for all the complexities of implementation, the ultimate mandate is fairly straightforward -- authorizers must determine whether a charter school is doing what it promised to do and act accordingly.

In light of the ultimate goal of educational accountability, authorizers must understand how they fulfill the promise of this role in public education. Therefore, NACSA adopts the following Principles and Standards for promoting the establishment and operation of quality charter schools through responsible oversight in the public interest.

Note: The Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing offers guidance that experience indicates will strengthen authorizer practices. This is intended as an educational resource only and is distributed with the understanding that the National Association of Charter School Authorizers is not engaged in providing legal advice nor rendering legal or other professional services by its distribution. Charter school authorizers are encouraged to freely and voluntarily associate themselves with the Principles and Standards contained herein to the extent that they independently determine such guidance to be consistent with the laws and regulations applicable to their jurisdiction.
Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing

NACSA believes that a quality charter school authorizer engages in responsible oversight of charter schools by ensuring that schools have both the autonomy to which they are entitled and the public accountability for which they are responsible.

In furtherance of this end, quality authorizers should:

- approach authorizing deliberately and thoughtfully with the intent to improve the quality of public school options;
- support and advance the purposes of charter school law;
- be a catalyst for charter school development to satisfy unmet educational needs;
- strive for clarity, consistency, and transparency in developing and implementing authorizing policies and procedures;
- be a source of accurate, intelligible, performance-based information about the schools that they oversee;
- be responsible not for the success or failure of individual schools, but for holding schools accountable for their performance;
- use objective and verifiable measures of student achievement as the primary measure of school quality; and,
- make the well-being of students the fundamental value informing all decision-making and actions.

The Principles for Quality Charter School Authorizing provide the foundation for the following Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing that link belief to practice.
Agency Capacity and Infrastructure

A quality authorizer creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary for conducting its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently.

A quality authorizer:

Organizational Structures
Implements plans, policies, and processes that streamline and systematize its work.

Defines external relationships and lines of authority to protect its authorizing functions from conflicts of interest and political influence.

Human Resources
Enlists competent leadership and required content knowledge through staff, contractual relationships, and/or intra- or inter-agency collaborations.

Financial Resources
Articulates the financial needs of the office.

Identifies and accesses funding sources.

Deploys funds effectively and efficiently.
Application Process

A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that follows fair procedures and rigorous criteria and grants charters only to those developers who demonstrate strong capacity for establishing and operating a quality charter school.

A quality authorizer:

Fair Procedures
Communicates chartering opportunities, processes, and decisions openly to the public.

Establishes a submission process with realistic and clear timelines, requirements, and expectations for content and format.

Explains how each stage of the application process will be evaluated.

Defines clearly how the requirements of the application are met.

Rigorous Criteria
Requires the applicant to provide a clear and compelling mission, a quality educational program, a solid business plan, effective governance and management structures, and evidence of the applicant’s capacity to carry out its plan.

Is open to considering innovative educational philosophies and approaches.

Charter Decisions
Utilizes a thorough evaluation of the applications by reviewers with educational, organizational, legal, and financial expertise.

Documents the factors that determined its decision about each application.

Grants charters only to applicants that have met the established criteria.

Provides prompt notification of decisions and informs applicants of their rights and responsibilities.

Makes a separate decision, after the granting of a charter, about a school’s readiness to open.
Charter Contracting
A quality authorizer negotiates contracts with charter schools that clearly articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, expected outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences and other material terms.

A quality authorizer:

Negotiation
Utilizes a collaborative process to ensure mutual agreement over the terms of the contract.

Rights and Responsibilities
Drafts contracts that:

Autonomy
Define the school’s rights, including those related to the educational program, control of funds, school management decisions, and waivers from traditional public school laws and regulations.

Expected Outcomes
Define the student performance, organizational, and mission-specific goals against which the authorizer will evaluate the school on an ongoing basis and for renewal.

Articulates rigorous performance standards relative to each of the stated goals.

Evaluation Process
Stipulate the process for evaluation, including but not limited to: the types of academic, organizational, financial, and compliance data that will be reviewed, and the process and frequency for gathering and reporting such data.

Performance Consequences
Explain the conditions under which the authorizer may intervene in the school’s operation or revoke the contract as well as procedures/protocols by which such interventions may occur.

Define the terms for renewal.

Material Terms
Include other provisions required by applicable statute.
Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation
A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that evaluates performance, monitors compliance, informs intervention and renewal decisions, and ensures autonomy provided under applicable law.

A quality authorizer:

Performance Evaluation
Implements an accountability system that generates all the information needed to determine whether a school is meeting the goals and standards articulated in its contract.

Shares accountability findings and evidence with schools, in a manner that facilitates their use for continuous school improvement.

Monitors Compliance
Monitors compliance requirements, including those legally mandated and those that are essential to fulfilling the authorizer’s public oversight responsibility.

Articulates the consequences for failing to meet compliance requirements.

Intervention
Provides clear, adequate, and evidence-based adequate notice of problems.

Allows reasonable time for remediation.

Makes decisions about whether and how to intervene on a clear and consistent basis.

Autonomy
Respects the school’s authority over its day-to-day operations.
## Renewal Decisionmaking

*A quality authorizer designs and implements a transparent and rigorous process that uses comprehensive data to make merit-based renewal decisions.*

A quality authorizer:

**Transparent Process**
Articulates the criteria for renewal.

Publishes a timetable and process for renewal.

Clearly communicates the options and consequences available under state law including revocation, non-renewal, probation, and renewal.

Explains any available rights of appeal, whether to administrative or legal bodies, through which the decisions of the authorizer can be challenged.

**Comprehensive Data**
Analyzes and weighs data regarding a school’s student, organizational, and mission-specific performance over time in relation to the terms of its contract.

Considers multiple sources of data, including state-mandated, standardized and internal test data, evidence of mission-related outcomes, and qualitative reviews, to judge school quality.

Solicits parent and public input into the charter renewal process and articulates how input will impact the decision.

**Merit-Based Decisions**
Grants renewal only to a school with a high quality educational program that has achieved the goals and standards identified in its contract, is organizationally and financially viable, and has been faithful to the terms of its contract and applicable law.

Outlines a protocol for the orderly closure of a school.

Adherence to these *Principles and Standards* will guide authorizer practices to ensure that the autonomy of charter schools is honored and that charter schools are held accountable for high student achievement.