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AUTHORIZER EVALUATION SUMMARY: An Analysis of Evaluations of Authorizer Quality





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With 42 states and Washington D.C. now authorizing nearly 6,700 public charter schools that enroll approximately 3 million children (NAPCS, 2016), ensuring charter school quality is a high priority for public education stakeholders. As designed, charter schools are semi-autonomous public schools, operated by a non-profit entity that has entered a contract or “charter” with an entity holding them accountable—the authorizer. Authorizers create and approve new school applications, provide oversight for the schools’ academic and operational performance, and make high-stakes decisions when a school is not meeting agreed-upon achievement standards (Wohlstetter, Smith & Farrell, 2001).

The National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) has been commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to develop this Authorizer Evaluation Summary. In partnership with the NCSRC, the National Association for Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has been conducting authorizer assessments over the past six years. However, the correlation between high-quality authorization practices and charter school impact has largely been unexplored.

In this report, we use a dataset of 43 NACSA-evaluated charter school authorizers to analyze the current state of authorizing policies and practices. While this sample of 43 authorizers represents only 4% of all charter school authorizers, these authorizers oversee 35% of all charter schools, and the schools they authorize serve 44% of all charter school students, based on 2013-2014 data. The charter school authorizers from the sample are in 28 states and represent two-thirds of states with charter school laws. They have been in operation for an average of 11 years.

In general, the evaluation sample is comprised of large authorizers (defined as authorizers that oversee 10 or more charter schools), as NACSA has prioritized larger authorizers.

This report uses quantitative analysis to examine six years of NACSA evaluations and authorizer characteristics to explore the following questions about authorizing policies and practices:

- How did the authorizers rate on NACSA’s formative evaluation?
- What areas were the authorizers highly rated on? Conversely, what areas did the authorizers receive lower ratings on?
- Do any relationships exist between formalized policies and the applied practices of authorizers?
- Is there a relationship between authorizer characteristics and their evaluation rating?

The formative evaluations conducted by NACSA included the following focus areas:

- Application and Decision-Making,
- Monitoring and Operations,
- Performance-Based Accountability,
- School Autonomy, and
- Organizational Capacity.

For the overall focus area and subsections within each focus area, authorizers were evaluated on *established* policies and *applied* practices.

NACSA used a Likert rating scale to report the authorizer's policies and practices, as compared to NACSA's Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing. The NACSA scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 being **Undeveloped**, and 5 being **Well-Developed**.

While there are limits to the analysis given the sample size and characteristics, this report identifies several key takeaways:

- The mean rating for all authorizer evaluations, established and applied, was slightly above **Partially Developed**.
- The areas of **Organizational Capacity** and **School Autonomy** were essentially tied for the highest scores, rating between **Partially Developed** and **Approaching Well-Developed**. **Performance-Based Accountability** was the lowest-ranked focus area, scored at **Minimally Developed**.
- **Application and Decision-Making** was the only focus area where there was a significant difference in established and applied ratings. Under this focus area, the low correlation between established policies and applied practices indicates that the authorizers are not implementing practices that fully align with their formal policies. The authorizers appear to be implementing procedures with a level of quality that is similar to their written policies in all other focus areas.
- Higher ratings on the **Performance-Based Accountability** area correlate positively with the authorizers' **School Autonomy** rating. The **Performance-Based Accountability** rating asks the question, "Does the authorizer have rigorous appropriate standards by which it holds schools accountable for results?" This finding is noteworthy because school autonomy is a fundamental tenet of charter schools and charter advocates fear that strengthening accountability may diminish school autonomy. This evidence, while preliminary, suggests that school autonomy does not necessarily decline as authorizers implement strong performance-based accountability systems.
- The size of the authorizer, based on the number of charter schools they oversee, was negatively correlated with the authorizer's **School Autonomy** average rating. According to the sample, as the authorizers grow, their **School Autonomy** rating decreases. The data indicate larger authorizers should be cognizant of their school autonomy policies and revisit their policies as they continue to grow their charter school portfolio.

Our analysis revealed clear model authorizer practices and areas for improvement and growth. This report can serve as a starting point to inform authorizers, policymakers, and key stakeholders in the charter school sector about effective authorizing practices.

SECTION I: INTRODUCTION



With 42 states and Washington D.C. now authorizing nearly 6,700 public charter schools that enroll approximately 3 million children (NAPCS, 2016), ensuring charter school quality is a high priority for public education stakeholders. As designed, charter schools are semi-autonomous public schools, operated by a non-profit entity that has entered a contract or “charter” with an entity holding them accountable—the authorizer. State legislatures delegate authority for charter school oversight to organizations known as charter school authorizers. Authorizers create and approve new school applications, provide oversight for the schools’ academic and operational performance, and make high-stakes decisions when a school is not meeting agreed-upon achievement standards (Wohlstetter, Smith & Farrell, 2001).

The National Charter School Resource Center (NCSRC) has been commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to develop this Authorizer Evaluation Summary. In partnership with the NCSRC, the National Association for Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has been conducting authorizer assessments over the past six years. The correlation between high-quality authorization practices and charter school impact has largely been unexplored. In this report, we use a dataset of 43 NACSA-evaluated charter school authorizers to explore the following questions about authorizing policies and practices:

- Over the past six years, how did the authorizers rate on NACSA’s formative evaluation?
- What areas were the authorizers highly rated on? Conversely, what areas did the authorizers receive lower ratings on?
- Do any relationships exist between formalized policies and the applied practices of authorizers?
- Is there a relationship between authorizer characteristics and their evaluation rating?

Our analysis is exploratory in nature, intended to inform a research gap by describing authorizer practices and understanding the relationship between authorizers, specific policies and practices, and authorizer characteristics. These trends have the potential to serve other authorizers as they look for models and practices to replicate. Additionally, this summary describes elements to inform stakeholders interested in further discussion or future research.

The remainder of this report is organized as follows:

- In Section II, we provide an overview of the history and nature of NACSA authorizer evaluations.

- In Section III, we provide an overview of our methodology and include a description of the evaluation sample used in the analysis.
- In Section IV, we summarize the authorizer evaluations and assess correlations between ratings and authorizer characteristics.
- Finally, in Section V, we conclude with a discussion of the implications for future analysis.

SECTION II: HISTORY AND NATURE OF AUTHORIZER EVALUATIONS



The purpose of the authorizer evaluations analyzed in this report was to evaluate current practices to improve authorizing systems. While this sample does not include a majority of currently operating authorizers, it is significant considering that authorizers in this sample oversee 44% of all charter schools and cover 65% of states with charter school laws.

NACSA provides two types of authorizer evaluations: formative and impact. To date, 91% of all authorizer evaluations are formative evaluations, and 9% are impact assessments. NACSA provides formative assessments to offer guidance to authorizers regarding their current practices. The evaluations identify areas of strengths and priorities for improvement. Occasionally, NACSA has returned to authorizers to provide an impact assessment or a re-evaluation on how the authorizers have implemented the formative recommendations. Since the methodology used for each impact evaluation was customized for the specific authorizer, these evaluations were not included in this analysis.

The rubric design is heavily based on NACSA's Principles and Standards, but has evolved over the years based on changes in field practices. Furthermore, when NACSA's Principles and Standards evolved, the rubric was revised to reflect the changes. The rubric does not articulate every authorizing policy and should not be interpreted as individual rules of practice. However, the different versions have significant overlap and are similar in spirit. Current central themes in the rubric include: 1) a distinction between formalized and *applied* practices; 2) high-stakes decision-making policies for approval, renewal, and revocation of charter school authorizations; and 3) assessing if the authorizers have the capacity and resources to implement their policies and practices.

Not every variable was assessed for every authorizer. Since the rubric was intended to be formative, custom sets of variables were applied to authorizers depending on their characteristics, policy considerations, and time of evaluation. This approach led to useful evaluations that serve as tools for formative assessment for each authorizer, regardless of type or size. Each rubric revision provided further targeted insight into an understanding of current authorizing practices.

Over the past six years, NACSA has developed a streamlined evaluation process, including document review and on-site visits. According to NACSA, the evaluations require significant time commitment from the authorizers; therefore, NACSA conducts the evaluations only when invited by the authorizer. The evaluations are best utilized when the authorizers are open and willing to receive feedback on their internal processes. To begin an evaluation, NACSA holds a kick-off meeting with the authorizer, outlining specific documents needed for collection. Once NACSA

receives those documents, a desk audit is performed. This process could be repeated if additional evidence is requested. Following the desk audit, NACSA conducts a site visit of the authorizer. Site visits include interviews with individuals, groups, and external stakeholders. Upon finalization of the report, NACSA provides an in-person presentation to the authorizer decision-making body and staff members. For example, with district authorizers, the results are presented to the district board, as well as, district leadership. This evaluation process has one goal: to improve authorizer practice.

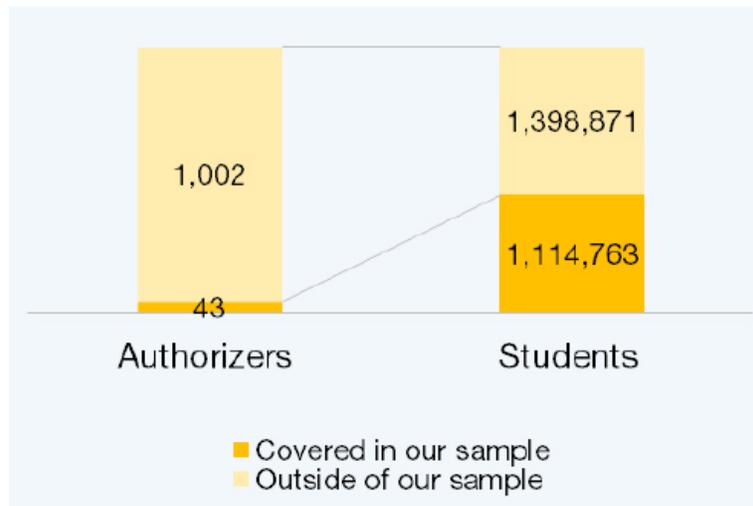
SECTION III: METHODOLOGY



This report used quantitative analysis to examine six years of NACSA evaluations and authorizer characteristics. The results are divided and presented by each focus area. These results are intended to be exploratory in nature and provide discussion points for further analysis.

Overview of sample: This analysis sample provides significant coverage of both the number of students and schools that the authorizers monitor. While this sample of 43 authorizers represents only 4% of all charter school authorizers, these authorizers oversee 35% of all charter schools, and the schools they authorize serve 44% of all charter school students, based on 2013-2014 data (**Figure 1**). The charter school authorizers from the sample are in 28 states and represent two-thirds of with charter school laws. The charter school authorizers from the sample have been in operation for an average of 11 years, monitoring roughly 2,763 schools serving approximately 1,115,000 students.

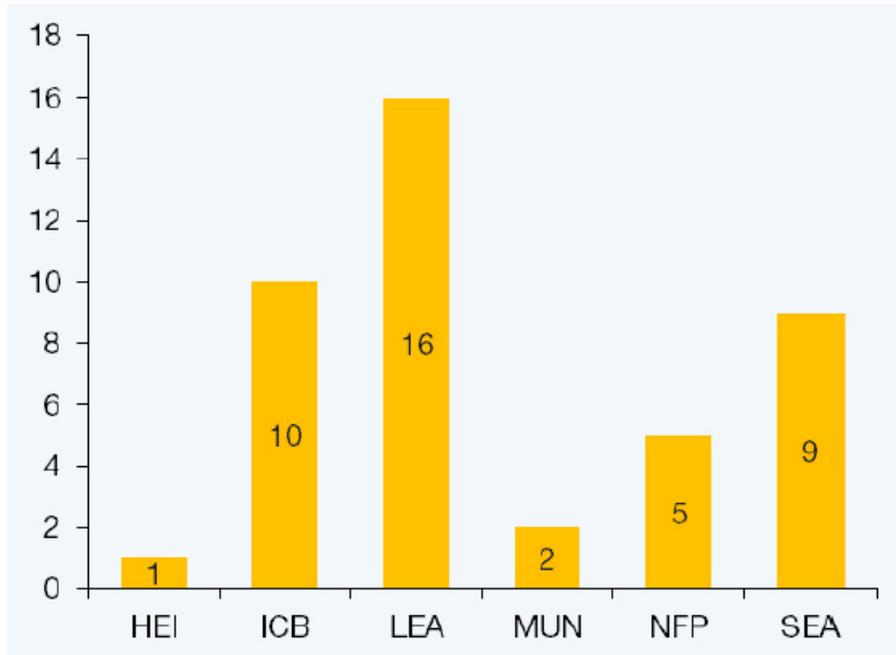
Figure 1: Coverage of Total Number of Charter School Students in Authorizer Sample



Most of the authorizer types in the sample are local school districts (37%), state educational agencies (21%), or independent charter boards (23%). Across the country, there are six types of authorizers: Higher Education Institutions (HEI), Independent Charter Boards (ICB), Local Education Agencies (LEA), Municipalities (MUN), Not-For-Profit (NFP), and State Educational

Agencies (SEA). The sample distribution for authorizer types is found in **Figure 2**. Of note, there are only two Municipality authorizers and they are both included in our sample.

Figure 2: Authorizer Types in the Sample



In general, the evaluation sample comprises large authorizers (88%), as NACSA has primarily conducted evaluations for organizations that provide monitoring services for a large number of schools and students. Authorizer size is defined by the number of charter schools being monitored by the authorizer. Large authorizers are defined as having 10 or more schools to oversee; small authorizers are defined as having nine or fewer schools to oversee.

Overview of NACSA authorizer evaluation: The formative assessments included the following areas: Application and Decision-Making, Monitoring and Operations, Performance-Based Accountability, and School Autonomy. In 2014, NACSA added a fifth focus area, Organizational Capacity, and restructured the Monitoring and Operations and Performance-Based Accountability sections of the report. For each focus area, NACSA evaluated multiple subsections. For the overall focus area and subsections within each focus area, authorizers were evaluated on *established* policies and *applied* practices. NACSA defines *established* as written policies, or what the authorizer intends to do. *Applied* practices are those implemented in the field or what the authorizer actually does. Please see **Appendix A** for a full description. The final evaluations included two overall ratings for each focus area—an overall focus area rating on *established* policies and an overall focus rating on *applied* practices.

NACSA used a Likert rating scale to report the authorizer's policies and practices, as compared to NACSA's Principles and Standards for Quality Authorizing. The NACSA scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 6 reserved for model authorizer practices (**Appendix B**). The **Model** rating of 6 was discontinued in 2012. It was given by NACSA infrequently, and any authorizer that received this rating is highlighted in this summary. Therefore, for the summary sample, the NACSA scale essentially ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 being **Undeveloped**, and 5 being **Well-Developed**.

- 1: Undeveloped
- 2: Minimally Developed

- 3: Partially Developed
- 4: Approaching Well-Developed
- 5: Well-Developed
- 6: Model (discontinued in 2012)

For this report, NCSRC coded these ratings into a database for each authorizer.

Overview of rubric analysis: In the NACSA evaluations, each focus area was given an overall rating, for both *established* policies and *applied* practices. The *established* and *applied* ratings for each subsection and focus area were coded into a database. Following the coding of the formative evaluations, NACSA characteristics were added to the analysis database. The characteristics were collected via voluntary information provided by the authorizers in an annual NACSA survey, or from document reviews. The demographic indicators include the type of authorizer, the number of charter schools under supervision, the year the charter school operation began, and the number of children served at the time of the evaluation. These demographic variables were used to provide an enhanced examination into the relationship between authorizer policies and practices and their size, age, and type.

For this report, we averaged the *established* and *applied* ratings for each focus area to determine an average overall rating for each focus area. We also calculated an overall evaluation rating for each authorizer based on the average across the focus areas. When applicable, means difference tests were conducted to determine if the rating scores are statistically different from one another. Findings were determined to be statistically significant if the p -value < 0.05. If the difference was found to be statistically significant, a correlation test was applied.

The supplementary qualitative analysis was conducted through several interviews with NACSA officials to explore the evolution of the NACSA framework. William Haft, Vice President for Authorizer Development at NACSA, provided the historical background, and Karega Rausch, Vice President of Research and Evaluation at NACSA, provided insight into the interpretation of the focus areas and subsection variables. An understanding of the evolution of the evaluation rubric provided context and assisted in the interpretation of the data.

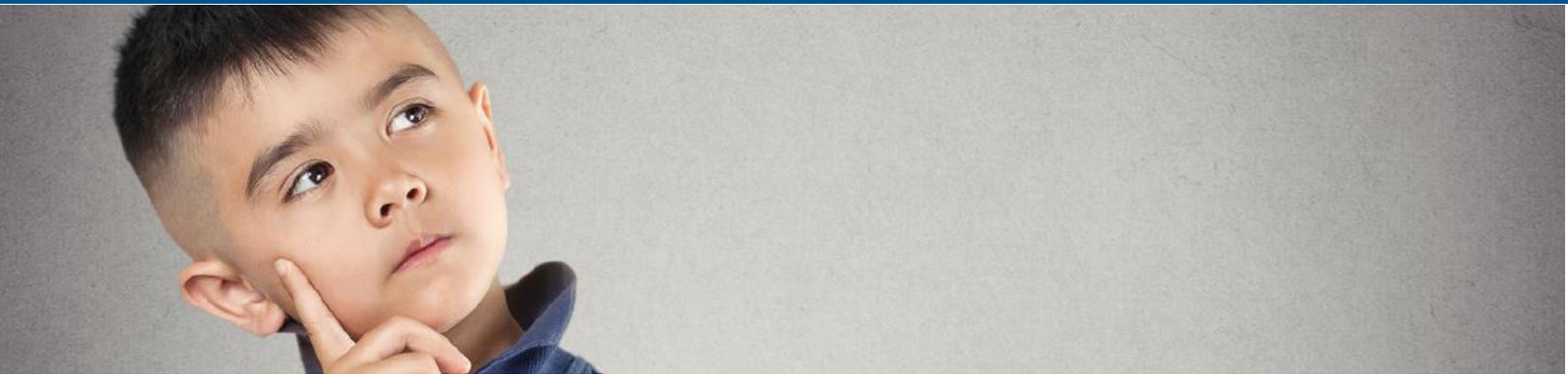
Limitations & Caveats

- First, due to the small sample size, appropriate quantitative methods were limited. Therefore, this Authorizer Evaluation Summary should be viewed as an exploratory analysis of NACSA's voluntary authorizer evaluations. The findings provide opportunities for future exploration but are not intended to be causal or predictive results.
- Second, the characteristics of the sample are relatively skewed. As seen in **Figure 2**, a large portion of the sample is composed of district and state educational agencies. Ongoing and future evaluations are being scheduled to balance the types of authorizers sampled.
- Third, 88% of the authorizers in the sample have more than ten schools. Therefore, our analysis of smaller authorizers is limited.
- Fourth, since Organizational Capacity was added as a focus area in 2014, it is included in only nine observations. Therefore, a summary of this area offers limited analysis. When more authorizers have been observed and rated in this area, further analysis may provide

a more comprehensive understanding in this area. The data collected from the nine authorizers will be treated similarly to baseline data.

- Finally, we recognize the effects of changes in the NACSA rubric. While these changes are appropriate in context, the variability in grading impacts the comparability of authorizer evaluations. NACSA does not provide a one-size-fits-all approach to their formative authorizer evaluations; therefore, this summative analysis highlights the critical elements found over the past six years.

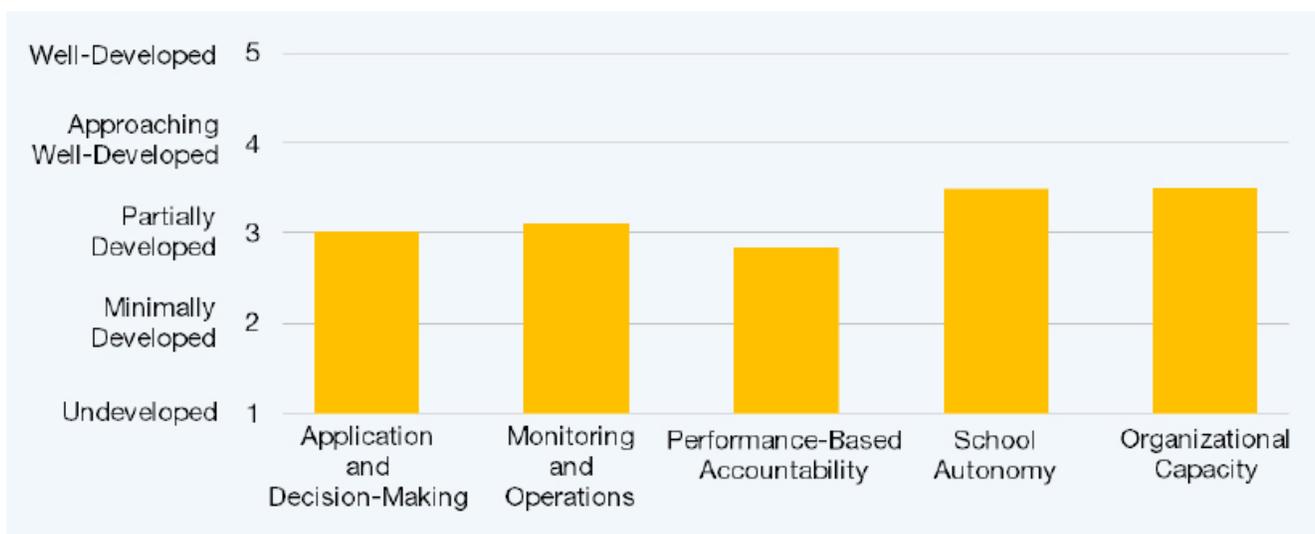
SECTION IV: FINDINGS



Overall, NACSA rated authorizers as **Partially Developed** in their policies and practices. As mentioned in the Methodology section, NACSA rating ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 being **Undeveloped**, and five being **Well-Developed**. NACSA defines **Partially Developed** as “Incomplete in that it contains some aspects of a **Well-Developed** practice, but is missing key components or is limited in execution.”

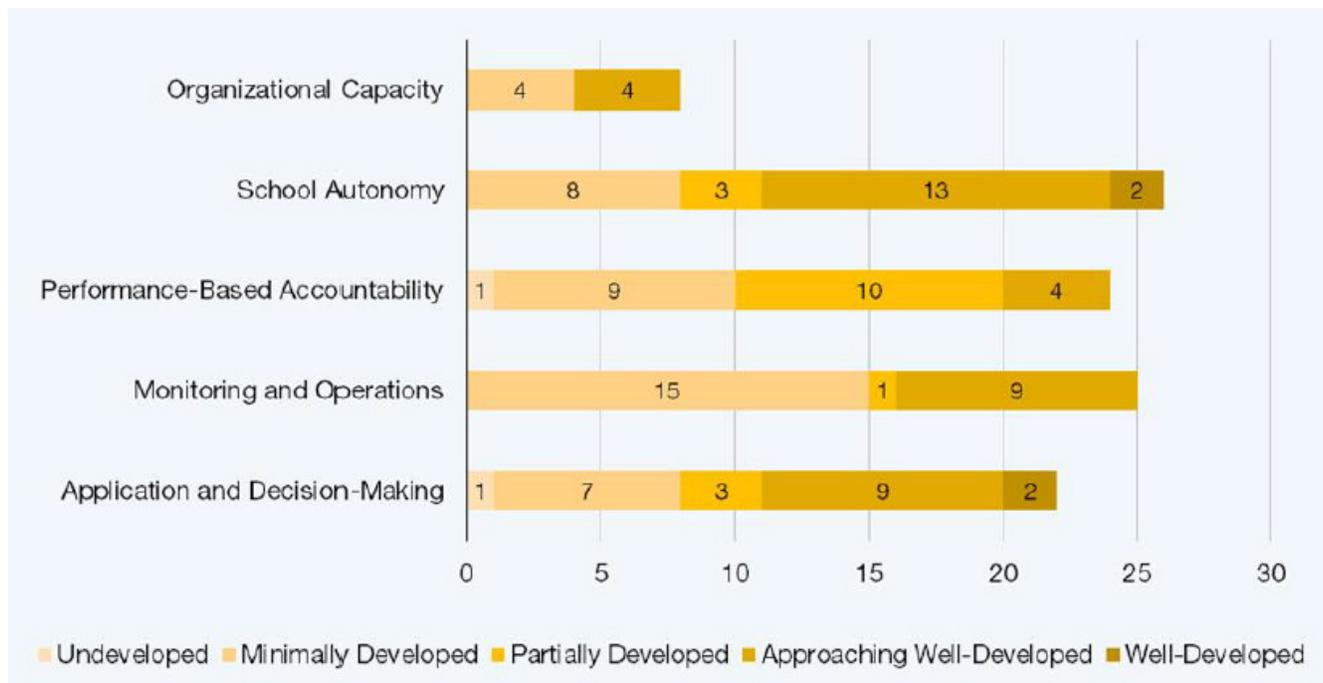
The mean rating for all authorizer evaluations, established and applied, is 3.19, indicating the authorizers, on average, rated slightly above **Partially Developed**. Performance-Based Accountability is the lowest-ranked focus area at **Minimally Developed (2.85)**. Applying a means difference test shows that the focus areas are statistically distinct from one another ($p = 0.03$) in some way. The probability score indicates that there are differences in the average focus area ratings that would not occur by chance. Further analysis found School Autonomy to be statistically different from Performance-Based Accountability and Monitoring and Operations. Across the five focus areas, charter school authorizers were rated highest in Organizational Capacity and in providing School Autonomy to their schools. They were rated the lowest in the Performance-Based Accountability focus area (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3: Average Overall Focus Area Ratings



The rating frequency count for each focus area is found in **Figure 4**. This figure provides an understanding of the rating distribution by focus area and rating score. All focus areas, except Performance-Based Accountability, skew right, toward **Well-Developed** practices.

Figure 4: Frequency Count of Average Authorizer Focus Area Ratings (Established and Applied)



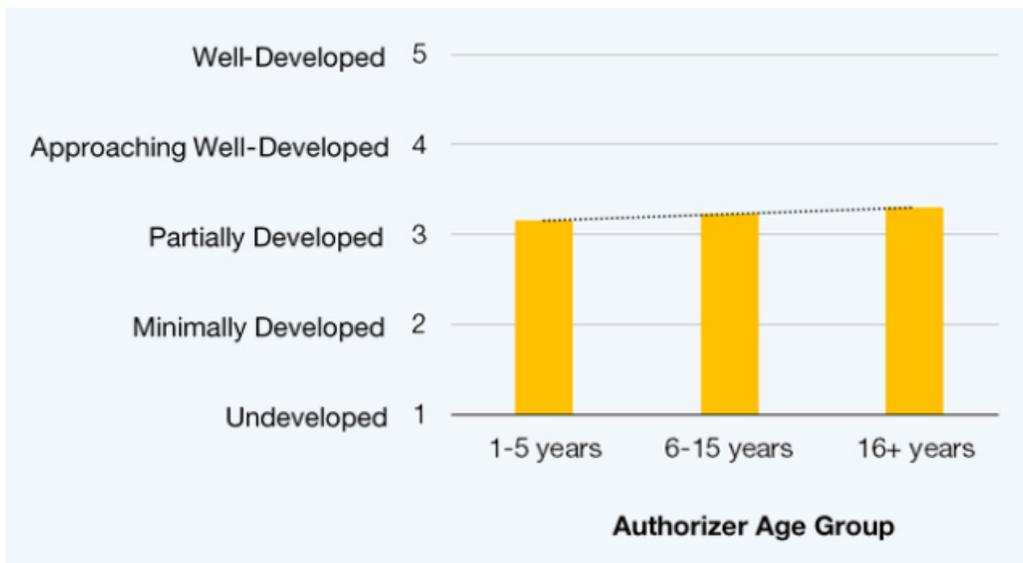
Application and Decision-Making is the only focus area where there is a significant difference in *established* and *applied* ratings. Under this focus area, the *established* and *applied* ratings are significantly different from one another ($p = 0.03$). The 60% correlation between *established* policies and *applied* practices indicates that the authorizers were not implementing practices that fully align with their formal policies. The authorizers appear to be implementing procedures with a level of quality that is similar to their written policies in all other focus areas.

Higher *Performance-Based Accountability* ratings do not appear to negatively impact school autonomy ratings. The authorizer sample for the *Performance-Based Accountability* focus area was divided into rating buckets: High (**Approaching Well-developed to Well-Developed**), Medium (**Partially Developed**), and low (**Undeveloped to Minimally Developed**). These buckets were then correlated with the overall school autonomy rating. The ratings of authorizers who were classified as **Partially Developed to Well-Developed** (medium-high) positively correlate with school autonomy scores. This evidence suggests that school autonomy does not decline as performance-based accountability systems are strengthened.

NACSA praised the top-rated authorizer, DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB), for its ability to supervise performance management systems, maintain school autonomy, and remain free of conflict within the authorizing organization. NACSA encouraged the authorizer to “Continue using robust classroom management systems... These systems—the Performance Management Framework [PMF] and CHARM [Charter Audit Resource Management] scores—are thoughtful, are thorough, and place a premium on school autonomy.”

There is no evidence of a significant correlation between authorizers' total rank and their age. The lack of correlation indicates that the total overall ratings are independent of how long an authorizer has been developing and practicing oversight policies. The age of the authorizer was calculated by the difference between the evaluation year and the year the authorizer began operating. To provide context, the authorizers were categorized into younger (1-5 years old), middle-aged (6-15 years old), and older (16+ years old). **Figure 5** displays the average rating for each of the three authorizer age groups. Anecdotally, it is important to note that, as the authorizers' age group rose, so did their proportionate rating scores. This trend is an early indication that age may have a relationship with authorizer rating scores, but the sample size is too small to pick up a significant correlation.

Figure 5: Average Total Rank by Authorizer Age Group



Application and Decision-Making

For Application and Decision-Making, NACSA posed the question:

“Does the authorizer approve applications based on an applicant’s demonstrated preparation and capacity to open and operate a quality charter school?”

In the area of Application and Decision-Making, charter school authorizers were ranked as **Partially Developed**. Only two authorizers received a **Well-Developed** rating for their overall (*established* and *applied*) Application and Decision-Making policies, Denver Public Schools (DPS) and Indianapolis Mayor’s Office (IMO). Most authorizers (68%) received overall Application Decision-Making ratings of **Partially Developed** to **Approaching Well-Developed**. Milwaukee Common Council excelled at the application/proposal formats, earning a rare **Model** rating (6) from NACSA. While this **Model** rating is no longer used in authorizer evaluations, NACSA acknowledged that Milwaukee Common Council’s “...application has a clear statement of expectations for proposal format that provide a clear, specific section-by-section description of what each part of the application should include.” In the authorizer evaluation report, NACSA includes a reference to a document published by the Milwaukee Common Council, titled *How to Organize Your Application*.

Milwaukee Common Council also received a **Model** rating (6) for Transparency—the only authorizer to-do so.

Charter school authorizers performed better in the established policies rather than their applied practices. The difference is statistically significant ($p= 0.03$) and the two variables only have a 60% correlation, indicating a mismatch between formalized authorizer intent and authorizer-implemented practices.

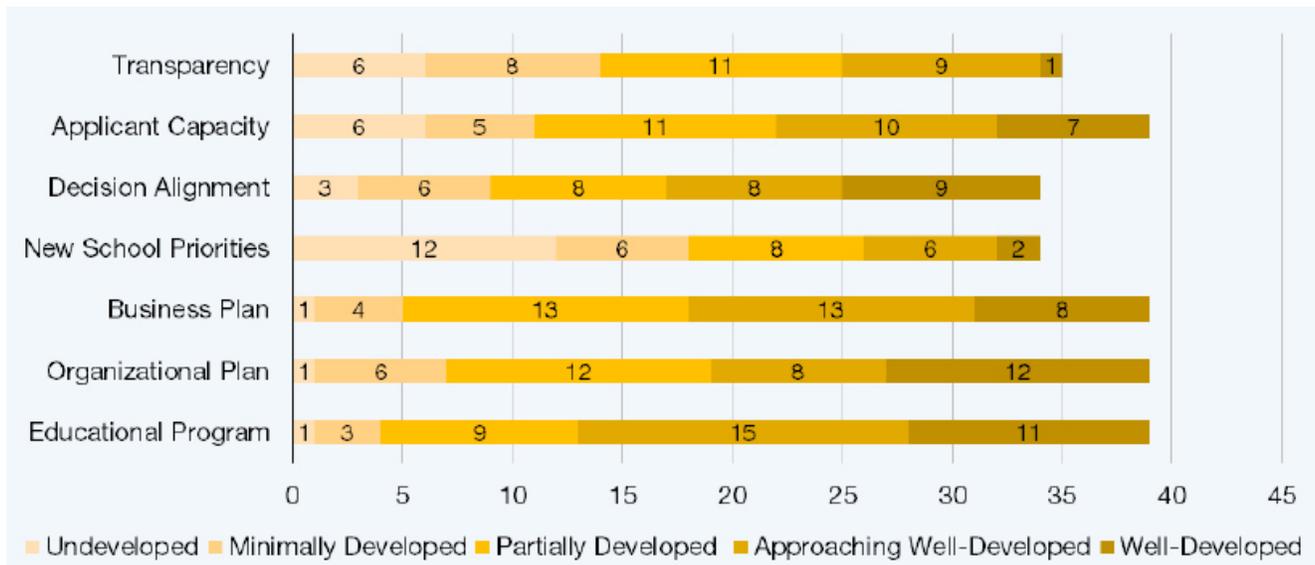
The Application and Decision-Making subsections are generally scored similarly. The authorizer’s level of development for New School Priorities is relatively low, while all others are **Partially Developed**. To evaluate how authorizers decided to approve or decline charter school applications, NACSA used a variety of variables over the past six years. **Figure 6** displays the most commonly-occurring subsections evaluated by NACSA over the six-year time frame.

Figure 6: Average Application and Decision-Making Subsection Ratings (2009 –2014)



The frequency counts for the commonly-evaluated subsections from Application and Decision-Making (**Figure 7**) indicate that fewer authorizers have **Well-Developed** approaches to New School Priorities and Transparency. The majority of authorizers are rated **Approaching Well-Developed** or **Well-Developed** in their approaches to Educational Programs, Organizational Plans, and Business Plans.

Figure 7: Frequency Count of Average Application and Decision-Making Subsection Ratings



Authorizer characteristics (age, type, size) do not impact their overall Application and Decision-Making rating. The lack of relationship between authorizer characteristics and demographics implies that the rating differences by age are no more than one would expect by chance.

A key takeaway for this focus area is the difference between formalized policies and authorizers’ practices; there is only a 60% correlation between the *established* and *applied* variables. Future analysis may further explore the differences between authorizers’ formalized policies and applied practices.

Monitoring and Operations

The guiding question for the Monitoring and Operations focus was:

“Does the authorizer have effective systems for establishing and monitoring school performance expectations and holding schools accountable as necessary to protect student and public interest?”

This focus area was rated 3.11, just above **Partially Developed**. The younger and middle-aged authorizers (0-15 years) were rated lower than the older authorizers (16+ years). Areas of consideration under Monitoring and Operations include Transparency, Educational Program, and Operations. These monitoring elements are critical to successful relationships with schools and the general public.

The overall rating for the Monitoring and Operations area is 3.11, just above **Partially Developed**. Only about 25% of authorizers received an **Approaching Well-Developed** or **Well-Developed** rating for their overall monitoring policies and practices. Additionally, the authorizers’ Monitoring and Operations *established* (3.25) policies were rated slightly higher than their *applied* (3.11) practices, both categorized as **Partially Developed**. Depending on the year, NACSA titled this focus area Monitoring and Operations, School Operations, or Operational Expectations (this last

category is alternatively described as “Performance Management Systems” in the more recent evaluations).

The subsection with the highest average rating was *Contract Operation (applied and established)*. NACSA described the contract used between schools and Colorado Charter Schools Institute (CCSI) as clear and inclusive of expectations. With CCSI, NACSA wrote, “CCSI’s practices are **Well-Developed** with respect to establishing and communicating foundational terms. The schools’ legal status, location, and length of charter terms are all stated clearly in existing school contracts.” Regarding material terms of contract operation, CCSI is rated **Well-Developed** “...because the contract sets clear expectations for both the school and the authorizers with respect to funding and financial oversight. CCSI is diligent in gathering the financial information needed to evaluate school performance in this area.”

The subsections that received low average ratings were: Transparency and Educational Program. These areas are critical to successful monitoring and operation practices. **Figures 8 and 9** display the most frequent subsections evaluated by NACSA over the six-year time frame.

Figure 8: Average Monitoring and Operations Subsection Ratings

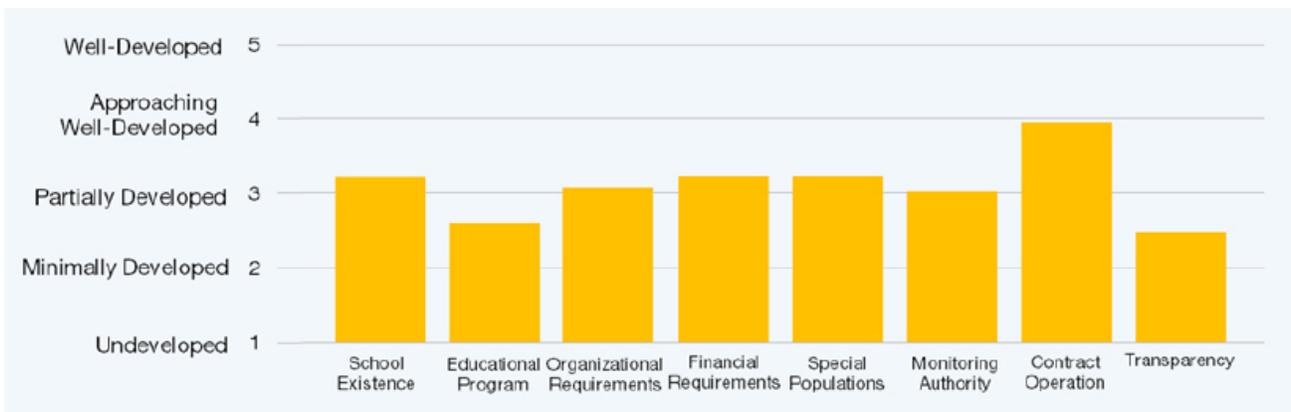
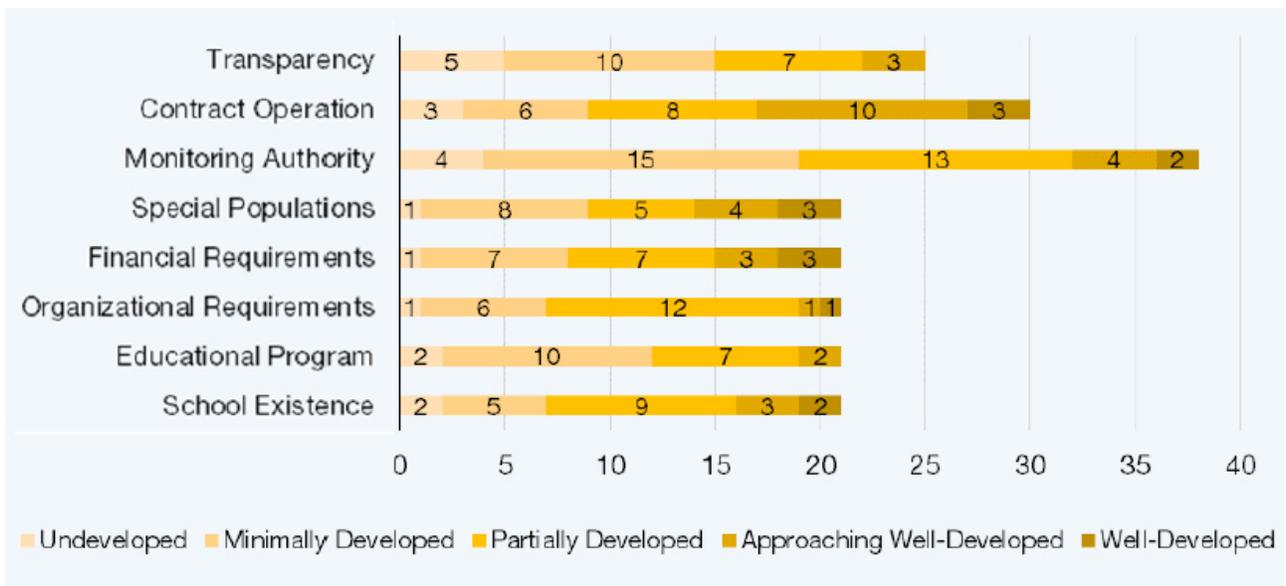


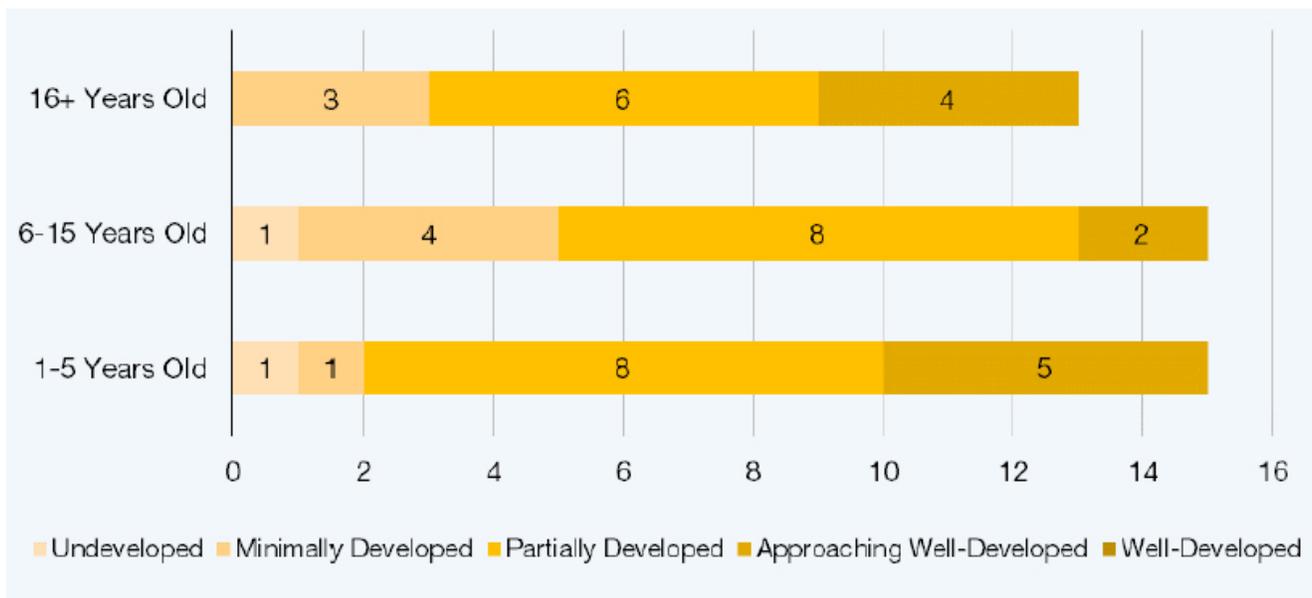
Figure 9: Frequency Count of Average Monitoring and Operations Subsection Ratings



Although these subsections were the most commonly used for assessment, only Monitoring Authority was used through 2014. Most of these subsections were no longer used for NACSA’s evaluation after 2012.

Authorizer characteristics (age, type, size) do not impact their overall Monitoring and Operations rating. Authorizer demographics do not have a significant correlation with their average Monitoring and Operations rating. However, the averages do show a relationship between the ratings and several characteristics, including age group (Figure 10) and authorizer type in the sample (Table 1). None of the authorizers received a Monitoring and Operations average of **Well-Developed**.

Figure 10: Frequency Count of Average Monitoring and Operations Overall Ratings by Age Group



The younger and older authorizers were rated higher than the middle-aged authorizers. Further exploration could inform the relationship between authorizer age and performance rating. Perhaps the younger and older authorizers both benefit from best-practices; one, as the authorizers developed methodologies over time; and the other, as they utilized the methodologies as a baseline for replication when creating new policies and procedures. It is not clear why the authorizers that are in between have not done as well. One consideration is that they could be old enough not to have had strong models when establishing their first procedures, yet not old enough to have felt the need to revise them yet. Any connection between the authorizer rating and their age is theoretical and clear causations are not supported by data gathered from this Authorizer Evaluation Summary. Follow-up research might be able to explore this dynamic more precisely, given the limitations of the current data.

The two types of authorizers that were effectively rated as **Approaching Well-Developed** were municipality and not-for-profit organizations.

Table 1: Average Monitoring and Operation Ratings by Authorizer Type

Authorizer Type	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA
Average	3.00	3.10	2.88	4.00	3.90	2.94

Performance-Based Accountability

The Performance-Based Accountability evaluation was informed by the guiding questions:

“Does the authorizer have rigorous appropriate standards by which it holds schools accountable for results? Are decisions made with the intent to maintain high standards and protect the students’ and the public’s interests?”

In all, this summary analysis suggests one key area for further exploration: Performance-Based Accountability policies and practices. The overall average for this focus area was 2.85. Patterns did not emerge from the authorizers’ size and age. However, authorizer types from the sample had statistically different means (**Table 2**). The ability to properly identify struggling charter schools, intervene, and then provide data-based decisions to renew or revoke a school’s charter, is an important component for charter school success.

Table 2: Average Performance-Based Accountability Ratings by Authorizer Type

Authorizer Type	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA
Average	3.06	3.40	2.70	4.25	2.50	2.69

The spread of performance ratings indicates an inconsistent variance in the authorizers’ policies and practices designed to hold schools accountable for performance-based measures. For Performance-Based Accountability decisions, nearly a third of authorizers received a rating of **Approaching Well-Developed** or **Well-Developed** on *established* policies. On the other end of the scale, nearly a third of authorizers were rated as **Undeveloped** or **Minimally Developed** in *established* policies and *applied* practices. One authorizer, DC PCSB, received high praise from NACSA regarding their performance-based accountability procedures. “[DC] PCSB has a track record for enforcing its standards and making difficult decisions regarding charter status and has revoked charters for academic, financial, and organizational reasons. The authorizer holds schools accountable for mission-specific goals established in the contract and regulations defined in state and federal law.”

The Performance-Based Accountability focus area measures whether an authorizer has developed appropriate standards by which it holds schools accountable for results and the extent to which it has implemented these standards with fidelity. Performance frameworks include the following: schools properly prepared to open, the ability to serve special student populations, and educational, operational, and financial performance. Essentially, the authorizers were evaluated on their policies and practices to evaluate a charter school’s performance to make high-stakes decisions regarding interventions, renewal, non-renewal, and revocations procedures.

From the evidence, authorizers have **Partially Developed** policies and practices for opening and closing schools. The variable assessing school closure focuses on the transition of school closing

after the decision to close has been made. With only **Partially Developed** policies in place, authorizers may not have the metrics needed to make high-stakes decisions. However, the frequency with which these policies were used to make revocation decisions was not tracked in the evaluation. Further exploration in this area is needed.

Charter school authorizers were rated as **Partially Developed** for school opening decisions, operational decisions, and charter school closure processes. Authorizers received a **Minimally Developed** rating for School Intervention, Educational Performance, and Renewal policies and practices. **Figures 11 and 12** display the most common subsections evaluated over the past six years. Given the consistency of the subsections used throughout the years, it is also evident that NACSA continues to prioritize variables to understand how well an authorizer can build a performance management framework.

Figure 11: Average Performance-Based Accountability Subsection Ratings

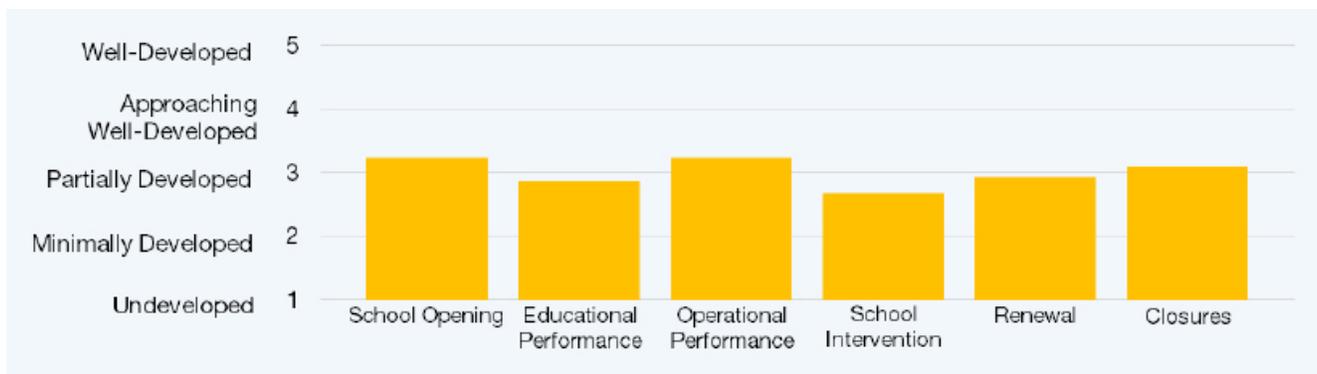
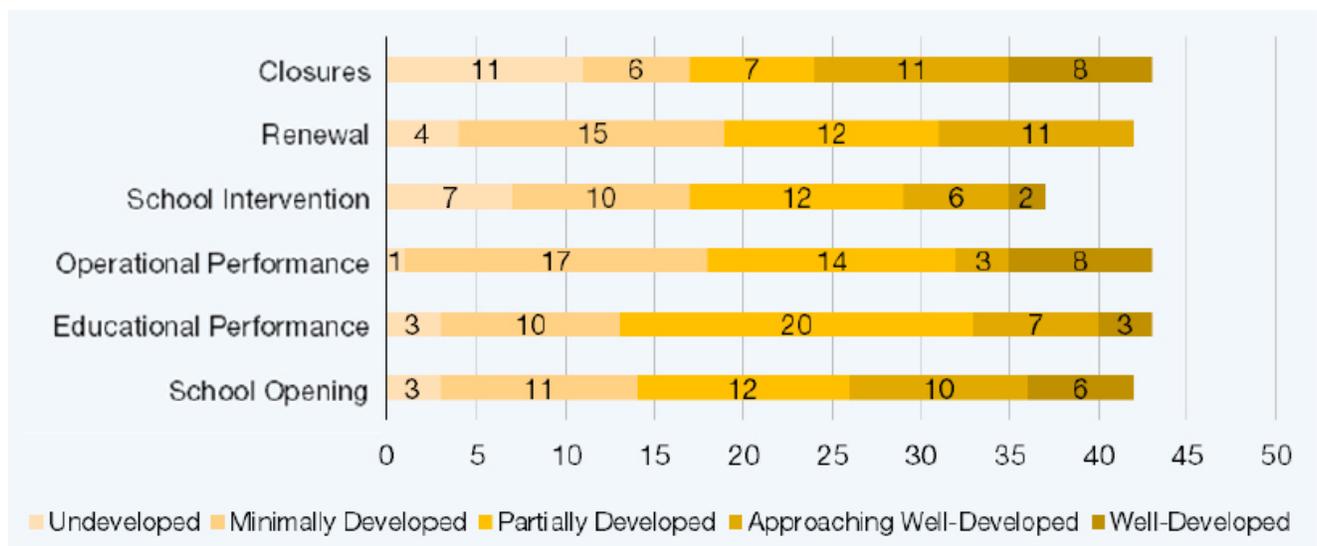


Figure 12: Frequency Count of Average Performance-Based Accountability Subsection Ratings



Municipality authorizers outperformed other authorizer types at the **Approaching Well-Developed level**. When comparing the differences in means, municipalities were statistically different ($p = 0.02$) from SEAs, ICBs, and HEIs in their Performance-Based Accountability ratings. **Table 2** displays the means by authorizer type. Both of the municipality authorizers received an **Approaching Well-Developed** rating, exceeding the focus area average.

Two authorizers, DC PCSB and the Indianapolis Mayor's Office (IMO), were standouts in the focus area of Performance-Based Accountability decisions. They were rated **Well-Developed** overall and received a large number of **Well-Developed** ratings in the subsections above. NACSA commented that IMO "...uses a comprehensive performance framework, by which it can evaluate schools' academic, organizational, and financial performance in response to [their] four [performance] core questions." These core performance questions guide the authorizers' monitoring procedures and accountability ratings. Regarding DC PCSB, NACSA wrote that "they have a track record for enforcing its standards and making difficult decisions regarding charter school status and has revoked charters for academic, financial, and organizational reasons. The authorizer holds schools accountable for mission-specific goals established in the contract and regulations defined in state and federal law." Despite this focus area having the lowest rating of all focus areas, there are model authorizers that received positive remarks from NACSA.

School Autonomy

NACSA's guiding question for this focus area underscores the fundamental aspect of charter school autonomy:

"Do schools have the autonomy to which they are entitled?"

School Autonomy was one of the highest-rated focus areas with an average rating of 3.49. School autonomy is a fundamental tenet of charter schools. Given its history, this focus area is important to determine if authorizers have put policies and practices in place to recognize this priority.

The authorizers scored between **Partially Developed** and **Approaching Well-Developed** for an average overall rating of 3.49. The focus area was positively correlated with higher Performance-Based Accountability ratings, indicating that stronger performance frameworks do not jeopardize School Autonomy ratings. An example of the positive correlation between these two focus areas is Denver Public Schools (DPS). They received **Well-Developed** ratings for overall Performance-Based Accountability and School Autonomy. While the charter school law in Colorado provides ample autonomy for charter schools, NACSA notes "DPS is cultivating a market for its services and has approached this effort in a way that complements and reinforces school autonomy to manage operations and financial resource allocation." There was no relationship found between the authorizers' characteristics (type, size, and age) and their average School Autonomy rating.

Nearly 56% of all authorizers received **Approaching Well-Developed** or **Well-Developed** ratings for their *established* policies; and 63% were rated **Approaching Well-Developed** or **Well-Developed** for their *applied* School Autonomy practices. The findings suggest that authorizers are providing autonomy to school charters. The higher performance ratings in this subsection indicate that the vast majority of authorizers are initiating and implementing higher-rated policies and practices. However, the authorizers earned lower average rating for Earned Autonomy (**Figure 13**), with nearly 40% of the sample earning **Undeveloped** rating scores (**Figure 14**).

Figure 13: Average of School Autonomy Subsection Ratings

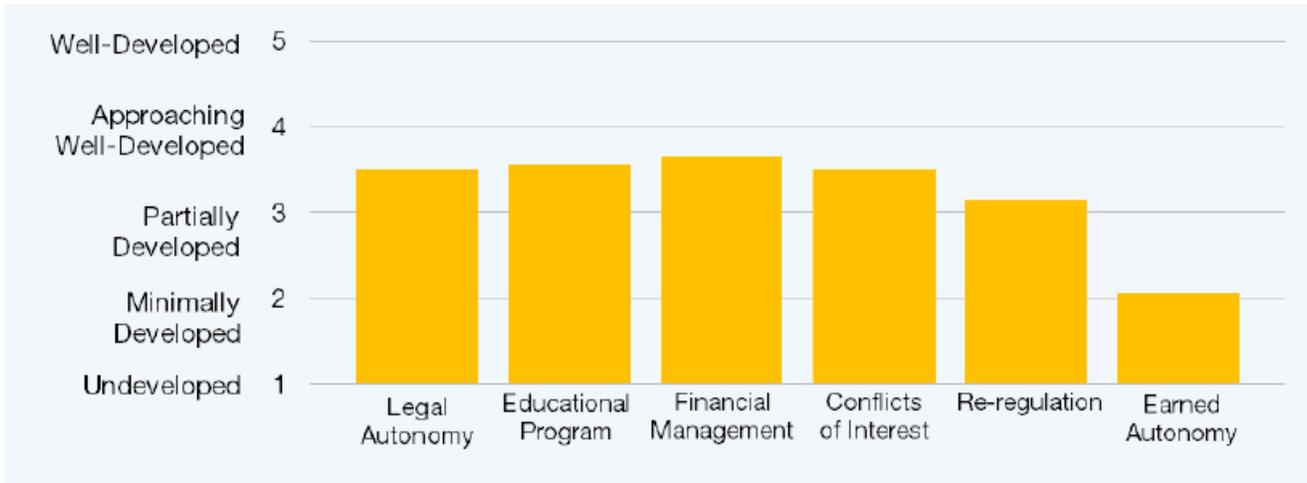
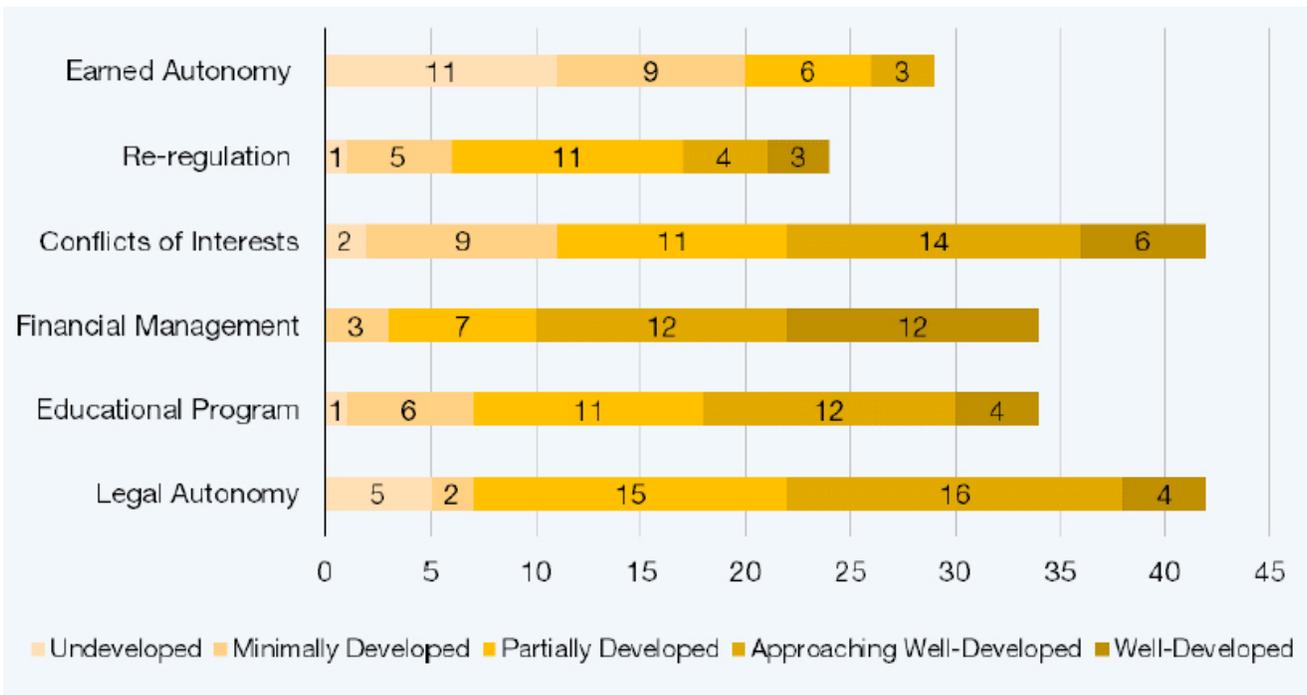


Figure 14: Frequency Count of School Autonomy Subsection Ratings



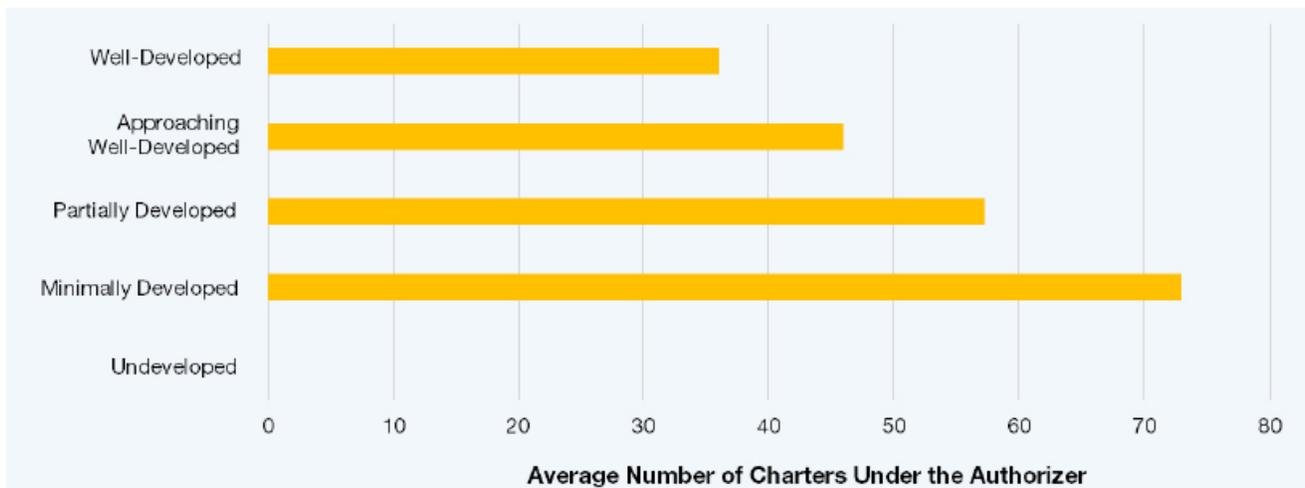
The only authorizer to receive a **Well-Developed** rating in either *established* or *applied* categories of earned autonomy was the IMO. In the evaluation report, NACSA wrote that the IMO’s “...accountability system that naturally provides more autonomy to high-performing schools through the frequency of its visits, varied reporting requirements, and contract renewal lengths based on prior performance” is a “...strong feature of IMO’s accountability system and represents a best practice technique for increasing the autonomy of quality charter schools. “The concept of Earned Autonomy and its application in evaluations is evolving.

The size of the authorizer, based on the number of charters they provided oversight for, was negatively correlated with the authorizer’s School Autonomy average rating. According to the

sample, as the authorizers grow, their school autonomy rating decreases ($p = -0.04$). **Figure 15** displays the correlation between the school autonomy rating and authorizer size. The data

indicates larger authorizers should be considerate of their school autonomy policies and revisit their policies as they continue to grow their charter school portfolio.

Figure 15: Average School Autonomy Rating by Average Authorizer Size



Organizational Capacity

The area of Organizational Capacity was guided by the question:

“To what extent do the organizational structure and systems support quality authorizing practices and forward the authorizer’s mission?”

Recently added in 2014, and ranked the highest out of all five focus areas, Organizational Capacity is a new indicator of authorizer competency. Organization Capacity is critical to implementing high-quality policies with fidelity.

Overall, the authorizers that were evaluated on their organizational capacity received a rating of 3.5, between **Partially Developed** and **Approaching Well-Developed** practices. The evidence suggests authorizers are more mature in their capacity to engage monitoring and operations procedures they have developed.

Regarding authorizer type, three ICB, two SEA, and four Not-for-Profit authorizers were evaluated. The SEA authorizers were collectively rated as **Partially Developed** (3.0) while the ICB (3.67) and Not-for-Profit (3.63) were closer to **Approaching Well-Developed**. The younger authorizers (1-5 years) were rated the highest at 3.67, followed by the older authorizers (16+ years) at 3.33. The authorizers between the ages of five through fifteen years ranked the lowest at 3.0. All of the age groups fall under the ranking of **Partially Developed**. Despite the low-performance rating (**Minimally Developed**) in *established* policies, authorizers applied these strategies at a higher rate (**Partially Developed**).

SECTION V: CONCLUSION



This summary analysis of authorizer evaluations aims to increase sector understanding of authorizer policies and procedures. This report intends to help identify areas for further research and in-depth analysis. With limited research currently available on the relationship between authorizers and the impact on charter school quality (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2010), this analysis layers a new national context on the relationship between authorizer characteristics, policies, and practices.

This report identifies several key takeaways. Future qualitative analysis could support this summative analysis to explore specific policies and practices that could be replicated.

- **Monitoring and Operations:** The analysis did not identify any linear relationship between authorizer age and their monitoring and operations rating. Given that younger and older authorizers rated equally well, best practices could be explored for individual authorizers rated highly in the monitoring and operations focus area.
- **The relationship between Performance-Based Accountability and School Autonomy:** This relationship warrants additional exploration. As school autonomy practices and policies rise, so do the authorizers' ratings on Performance-Based Accountability measures. Understanding this dynamic will provide future dialogue and understanding when addressing either focus area.

Furthermore, gaining an understanding of policies to avoid or address common pitfalls could be beneficial for authorizers.

- **Application Development and Decision Alignment:** Evidence suggests opportunities to explore charter school application development and decision practices. There appear to be challenges associated with aligning formalized and implemented policies on the review of applications and final decisions for approval.
- **Monitoring and Operations:** Future analysis could explore the relationship between the age of the authorizer and the design and implementation of their monitoring and operations.
- **Performance Management and Performance Frameworks:** The lower subsection ratings suggest an opportunity for continued research in accountability systems in the areas of school interventions, revocation decisions, and financial and educational performance accountability.

- **Organizational Capacity:** SEAs were rated **Partially Developed** in Organization Capacity, lower than other types of authorizers. Further analysis of the relationship between SEAs and their organizational capacity could provide insight into why this type of authorizer was rated on a lower level than the others.
- **Transparency:** Authorizers were rated lower in Transparency subsections than other subsections across the focus areas. On average, authorizers were rated lower in the subsection areas of Transparency for both Performance-Based Accountability and Monitoring Operations, but not Application and Decision-Making. Further analysis could provide an understanding of why there are differences in Transparency policies and procedures between these three focus areas.

This summary provides an overview of six years of NACSA authorizer evaluations from across the nation. The analysis revealed clear model authorizer practices and areas for improvement and growth. This report can serve as a starting point to inform authorizers, policymakers, and key stakeholders in the charter school sector about effective authorizing practices. As more data is collected and reviewed from upcoming NACSA evaluations, authorizers will have a greater understanding of how their policies and procedures match those of other authorizers. Furthermore, the individual authorizers will gain feedback and guidance on the policies they are implementing well, as evaluated by NACSA, and develop awareness of those that need revision.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Focus Areas and Subsection Definitions

Part 1: Application and Decision-Making:

“Does the authorizer approve applications based on an applicant’s demonstrated preparation and capacity to open and operate a quality charter school?”

- **Vision and Mission:** The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the school’s vision and mission statement.
- **Educational Program:** The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the proposed educational program, including the educational philosophy, curriculum and instruction, teaching skills and experience, calendar and daily schedule, target population, enrollment, and plans for educating students with special needs.
- **Organizational Plan:** The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the proposed organizational plan.
- **Business/Financial Plan:** The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous evaluation criteria for the proposed business plan including financial viability of the plan demonstrated through budget projections that are aligned with the proposed educational program.
- **Applicant Capacity:** The authorizer has thorough requirements and rigorous criteria for evaluating the applicant’s capacity to implement the school plan effectively including but not limited to a substantive in-person capacity interview with all qualified applicants.
- **New School Priorities:** The authorizer has defined New School Priorities based on identified needs in the population to be served.
- **Application Responsiveness:** The authorizer has adapted the application to meet information needs generated by different types of proposals (e.g. virtual, replication, alternative education, etc.)
- **Application Process Timeline:** The authorizer has clear and realistic timelines for the application process.
- **Application Format:** The authorizer provides clear guidance and requirements regarding application format and submission requirements.
- **Interview:** The authorizer conducts a substantive in-person capacity interview with the applicant group.
- **Transparency:** The authorizer has transparent processes for both application evaluation and application decision-making.

- **Decision Analysis:** Authorizer decision-making is informed by documented evidence and analyses of the extent to which the plan satisfies approval criteria and the extent to which applicants demonstrate strong preparation and capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school.
- **Applicant Pool Development:** The authorizer takes affirmative steps to increase the likelihood of receiving viable applications that meet identified needs.
- **Application Materials and Process:** The authorizer provides clear guidance and requirements regarding application materials and submission requirements, and runs a clear and Well-structured application process with realistic timelines.
- **Priorities and Application Adaptations:** The authorizer adapts the 'basic' application as necessary based on identified needs, including specialized applicant types that are commonly received and/or desired program types.

Part 2: Monitoring Operations:

“Does the authorizer have effective systems for establishing and monitoring school performance expectations and holding schools accountable as necessary to protect student and public interest?”

- **School Existence:** The authorizer defines and monitors the material terms for the school's existence including legal status of the school, location, authority of signatories, length of the charter term, and governing body restrictions or requirements and verifies compliance at least annually.
- **Educational Program:** The authorizer defines and monitors material terms of the educational program consistent with the school's mission and legal obligations.
- **Organizational Requirements:** The authorizer defines and monitors organizational terms consistent with the school's governance and compliance obligations.
- **Financial Requirements:** The authorizer defines and monitors financial operations consistent with the school's legal obligations and established professional standards.
- **Special Populations:** The authorizer establishes clear expectations for and ensures compliance with school obligations to special populations.
- **Monitoring Authority:** The authorizer exercises adequate Monitoring Authority that includes regular performance feedback.
- **Contract Operation:** The parties have clarity regarding how the contract will operate with clear provisions for notice, waiver, severability, assignment, amendment, merger, indemnification, survival, and contract dispute resolution. The authorizer executes a charter contract for each school that clearly articulates the rights and responsibilities of each party.

- **Transparency:** The authorizer communicates to schools and the public clearly and consistently regarding expectations for and status of school operations.
- **Ongoing Monitoring:** The authorizer has an effective process for monitoring educational, financial, and organizational performance of the schools it authorizes.

Part 3: Performance-Based Accountability:

“Does the authorizer have rigorous appropriate standards by which it holds schools accountable for results? Are decisions made with the intent to maintain high standards and protect the students’ and the public’s interests?”

- **School Opening:** The authorizer ensures that approved schools are prepared adequately for opening.
- **Educational Performance:** The authorizer holds schools accountable for academic performance using objective and verifiable measures of student achievement as the primary measure of school quality.
- **Operational/Organizational Performance:** The authorizer holds schools accountable for compliance with organizational performance requirements established in the charter contract or the performance framework, including educational program requirements, governance and reporting, financial management and oversight, and operational requirements related to students, employees, and the school environment.
- **Financial Performance:** The authorizer holds schools accountable for being financially responsible and viable.
- **School Intervention:** The authorizer conducts merit-based interventions in response to clearly identified deficiencies in the school’s record of educational, organizational and/or financial performance.
- **Charter Revocation:** The authorizer makes merit based revocation decisions based on the school’s record in relation to established expectations for educational, organizational and financial performance.
- **Renewal:** The authorizer makes merit based renewal decisions based on the school’s record in relation to established expectations for educational, organizational and financial performance.
- **Closure:** Following non-renewal, revocation or voluntary return of the charter, the authorizer ensures orderly closure of the school.
- **Transparency:** The authorizer makes high stakes accountability decisions in a way that is transparent to schools and the community.
- **Decision Alignment:** Authorizer makes accountability decisions that are informed by and align with documented evidence and analysis of the extent to which the school satisfies

performance expectations. The analysis presented to decision makers is of high quality, and the merits of the decisions themselves show decision-making is based on thoughtful analysis, ensuring that only the charter schools that meet or exceed expectations are in operation.

Part 4: School Autonomy:

“Do schools have the autonomy to which they are entitled?”

- **Legal Autonomy:** The authorizer defines and respects the autonomies to which the schools are entitled based on statute, waiver, or authorizer policy. The authorizer does not reduce school autonomy unless there is a compelling reason to do so.
- **Educational Process/Program:** The authorizer defines and respects school autonomy over the educational process.
- **Financial Management:** The authorizer defines and respects school autonomy over financial operations.
- **Conflicts of Interest:** The authorizer operates free from conflicts of interest.
- **Re-regulation:** The authorizer does not reduce school autonomy unless there is a compelling reason to do so.
- **Differentiated Oversight:** The authorizer periodically reviews compliance requirements and evaluates the potential to differentiate school oversight based on flexibility in the law, demonstrated school performance, and other considerations.

Part 5: Organizational Capacity:

“To what extent do the organizational structure and systems support quality authorizing practices and forward the authorizer’s mission?”

- **Strategic Planning:** The authorizer plans well for the future in a way that aligns with NACSA’s *Principles and Standards*. The authorizer uses quality authorizing to forward its mission.
- **Organizational Structure:** The authorizer purposefully and economically staffs its office to effectively carry out its authorizing duties. Staff positions are clearly defined, both in policy and in practice.
- **Human Capital Processes and Systems:** The authorizer has systems necessary for building and maintaining a strong workforce and implements them with fidelity.
- **Organizational Budget:** The authorizer’s budget allows for organizational effectiveness and stability. The budget is aligned with its strategic goals, and supports quality authorizing practice.

- **Leadership and Decision-making Body:** The authorizer leadership and decision-making body understand their roles and responsibilities; are invested in the mission, vision, and strategic plan of authorizing; and have the expertise necessary to make Well-informed decisions that support the tenets of a high quality authorizer.

Appendix B: NACSA's Authorizer Evaluation Rating Scale 1 to 6



Model (6)

Exceptional in that it exceeds the expectations of NACSA's *Principles and Standards for Quality Authorizing* and warrants notice from and emulation by other authorizers.
[Discontinued in 2012]



Well-Developed (5)

Commendable in that it meets or exceeds NACSA's *Principles and Standards*.



Approaching Well-Developed (4)

Sound in that it fits most but not all aspects of a well-developed practice.



Partially Developed (3)

Incomplete in that it contains some aspects of a well-developed practice, but is missing key components or is limited in execution.



Minimally Developed (2)

Inadequate in that the authorizer has minimally undertaken the practice or is carrying it out in a way that falls short of satisfying the standard.



Undeveloped (1)

Wholly inadequate in that the authorizer has not undertaken the practice or is carrying it out in a way that falls far short of the standard.

Appendix C: NACSA's 12 Essential Practices

1. Have a published and available mission for quality authorizing
2. Have staff assigned to authorizing within the organization or by contract
3. Sign a contract with each school
4. Have established, documented criteria for the evaluation of charter applications
5. Publish application timelines and materials
6. Interview all qualified charter applicants
7. Use expert panels that include external members to review charter applications
8. Grant initial charter terms of five years only
9. Require and/or examine annual, independent financial audits of its charter schools
10. Have established renewal criteria
11. Have established revocation criteria
12. Provide an annual report to each school on its performance

Appendix D: List of Charter School Authorizers Included in the Sample

State	Evaluation Year	Authorizer	Number of Schools (Currently)**	Type
AR	2011	Arkansas Board of Education	55	SEA
AZ	2011	Arizona State Board for Charter Schools	501	ICB
CA	2013	Sacramento City Unified School District	14	LEA
CA	2013	Oakland Unified School District	37	LEA
CA	2011	Stockton Unified School District	13	LEA
CA	2010	Los Angeles Unified School District	277	LEA
CO	2012	Denver Public Schools	52	LEA
CO	2010	Aurora Public Schools	6	LEA
CO	2009	Colorado Charter School Institute	37	ICB
DC	2013	District of Columbia Public Charter School Board	111	ICB
DE	2011	Delaware Department of Education	24	SEA
FL	2012	Hillsborough County Public Schools	42	LEA
GA	2014	State Charter School Commission of Georgia	20	ICB
GA	2012	Atlanta Public Schools	17	LEA
GA	2012	Fulton County Schools	8	LEA
HI	2011	Hawaii Charter School Review Panel*	34	ICB
ID	2014	Idaho Public Charter School Commission	34	ICB
IL	2012	Chicago Public Schools	132	LEA
IN	2014	Indiana Charter School Board	14	ICB
IN	2012	Indianapolis Mayor Office	35	MUN
IN	2011	Ball State University	31	HEI
LA	2012	Louisiana Board of Elementary & Secondary Office	96	SEA
MD	2011	Baltimore City Public Schools	37	LEA
MI	2013	Detroit Public Schools	14	LEA
MN	2014	Volunteers of America – Minnesota	15	NFP
MN	2014	Pillsbury United Communities	15	NFP
MN	2014	Friends of Education	17	NFP
MN	2014	Novation Education Opportunities	19	NFP
MN	2012	Audubon Center of the North Woods	35	NFP
MN	2012	Minneapolis Public Schools	2	LEA

State	Evaluation Year	Authorizer	Number of Schools (Currently)**	Type
NC	2011	North Carolina State Board of Education	161	SEA
NJ	2012	New Jersey Department of Education	89	SEA
NM	2010	New Mexico Public Education Commission	59	SEA
NV	2011	Nevada Board of Education*	22	ICB
NY	2013	New York City Department of Education	65	LEA
OR	2014	Oregon State Board of Education	4	SEA
PA	2011	School District of Philadelphia	82	LEA
RI	2014	Rhode Island Board of Education	24	SEA
SC	2011	South Carolina Public Charter School District	32	ICB
TN	2011	Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools	25	LEA
TX	2013	Texas Education Agency	632	SEA
UT	2011	Utah State Charter School Board	108	ICB
WI	2009	Milwaukee Common Council	10	MUN

*Name/entity has changed since the time of evaluation.

**Source: NACSA and National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Datasets, 2015-16. NACSA tracks the number, size, and types of charter school authorizers and the schools they authorize through reviews of state statutes, authorizer surveys, and ongoing cooperation and sharing of data with the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

HEI = Higher Education Institution; **ICB** = Independent Charter Board; **LEA**= Local Education Agency; **MUN**= Municipality; **SEA**= State Educational Agency



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