# PRACTICES THAT MATTER

NACSA examined the contexts and practices of authorizers with some of the strongest portfolios of charter schools in the country and those of authorizers with average portfolio performance. When we compared the two groups of authorizers, many distinctions emerged.

The following contexts and practices apply to authorizers with strong charter school portfolios. Although there are clear distinctions that set authorizers with strong portfolios apart from those with average portfolios, findings associated with both cannot be dismissed as unimportant. Our research did not examine authorizers with low-performing schools; while not tested, some findings may be necessary for at least an average school portfolio, or foundational for a strong portfolio of schools.

For ease of discovery, we've organized our findings into four categories:

1. Authorizer culture and characteristics

2. Application and school opening

3. Monitoring and intervention

4. Renewal, expansion, and closure

NACSA encourages authorizers to review these findings against their own work and ask questions about how they could improve. In some settings, authorizers may encounter barriers preventing the replication of some of these practices and contexts. In these instances, authorizing institutions, authorizing staff, local advocates, and policymakers should work together to remove such barriers.

# AUTHORIZER CULTURE AND CHARACTERISTICS
## Decision Making and Culture

| GOAL SETTING | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| • Authorizer goal setting and planning tends to be focused on annual core authorizing activities and are not part of a long-term (multi-year) traditional strategic plan.<br><br>• Authorizers tend to have goals and activities specific to cyclical authorizing functions (e.g., application season, renewal season, site visit season).<br><br>• Authorizing goals and key activities are updated at least annually and are specific to local context.<br><br>• Authorizers have an intentional goal alignment process, in order to avoid conflicting goals and activities and/or to ensure they have adequate capacity to execute multiple goals. | • N/A |

| DATA "OBSESSED" CULTURE | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| • Actively and intentionally acquire school data, including collecting data that may be disconfirming to perceptions. Data is actively explored, and incorporated into decision making (aligned with key decisions that need to be made, used to make all high-stakes decisions).<br><br>• Only ask schools for information they are unable to reliably and accurately get from other sources. | • Use accumulation of evidence to answer key questions. Authorizer never relies on one piece of data/evidence.<br><br>• Authorizing staff provides comprehensive, data-based rationales for unambiguous high-stakes recommendations to board. This is designed to provide the board with clear direction, information, and justification to make high-stakes decisions. |

## DECISION MAKING

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| **Jg** <br> 3 <br> Judgment <br><br> • Professional staff is not bound by protocols, templates, or other authorizing tools that limit their decision making. Staff has a clear belief and orientation that such tools assist, not dictate, decisions (a high degree of professional judgment is used in decision making). <br><br> • Staff do not use professional judgement in decision making based on opinions or beliefs, or independent of tools and protocols. Rather, they make decisions grounded in facts, data, and expertise from a robust body of evidence. <br><br> • Create and use protocols and processes that allow for nuanced discussions, and collect numerous qualitative and quantitative data to inform and justify decisions with evidence. <br><br> **Jg** <br> 3 <br> Judgment <br><br> • Do not require or prefer an "if-then" type of intervention system post school opening (i.e., a system that lays out an authorizer's response/requirements to specific offenses/issues that come up a priori). Rather, preferred intervention system includes professional judgment, deliberative conversations, and utilizing past responses that were effective in remedying situations. | • Have well-developed protocols and tools that are used in decision-making. <br><br> • There are no "point totals" that solely dictate decisions. |

## RELATIONSHIP TO SCHOOLS

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Authorizers view role as supporting school success, not as a "compliance cop." Yet they also draw a very clear line between providing "support" and "direction," the latter of which is strongly avoided. <br><br> • Intentionally develop relationships with school staff and leadership, typically through visits to the school and phone calls, outside of formal accountability processes. | • Authorizers have a sense of humility about their work in relationship to that of people in schools. This sense of humility results in an orientation that authorizers not only shouldn't, but can't, give schools direction on how to improve. |

## CONTINUOUS CREATION, IMPROVEMENT, AND DISSEMINATION

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Avidly seek out new/best practices from other authorizers (and at times other sectors), and modify to fit their context.<br><br>• Structured, cyclical opportunities for staff reflection and self-critique on practices and systems.<br><br>• Continually (typically annually) review policies and procedures, and roll back unneeded paperwork or compliance burdens on schools. | • Entrepreneurial in creating new authorizing practices or new ways of executing existing authorizing practices.<br><br>• "Open-source" culture; share practices with other authorizers. |

## Mission and Environment

## MISSION STATEMENT AND PURPOSE

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • N/A | • Authorizers have a mission statement specific to authorizing that speaks to the organization's unique strengths or circumstances. Authorizers that exist within a larger "parent" organization also have an authorizing-unique mission statement.<br><br>• Mission and vision statements are varied, likely connected to local context.<br><br>• Authorizers are principally focused on authorizing strong schools, but also explicitly see their role as larger than that function (e.g., filling community gaps/ needs, catalyzing systemic change in public education, revolutionizing authorizing). |

**Le** ¹
Leadership

nacsa

## ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Organizational values are explicit and reinforced through a range of activities, such as being posted in visible locations throughout the office or staff readings and discussions about original and current authorizing purposes.<br><br>• Authorizers actively share and inculcate staff in their "creation story" in order to influence and shape current culture (i.e., how they became an authorizer and important early actions that continue to reinforce their values and principles, such as early closure of low-performing schools). | • N/A |

**Le** ¹ Leadership

## EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • N/A | Authorizing often exists in a supportive charter school ecosystem with:<br><br>• A state association (or equivalent) focused on state level advocacy and that is often aligned with authorizer needs around quality (although some healthy tension was noted in many places).<br><br>• Support organizations that help with application and new school development, often explicitly aligned with the authorizer's written expectations (application areas and pre-opening spaces).<br><br>• Support organizations that help with existing school improvement. |

# Leadership and Staff Development

| AUTHORIZING WITHIN LARGER PARENT INSTITUTIONS | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| **Cm** (Commitment) Authorizing is a highly important and visible function within the larger "parent" organization.<br><br>• Role of authorizing is explicitly mentioned in the larger parent organization's strategic plan. | • Non-authorizing staff within larger organization is encouraged to participate and add value to key authorizing activities (e.g., applications); however, decisions on which non-authorizing staff to include reside within authorizing senior leadership. |

| SENIOR AUTHORIZING LEADERSHIP | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| Highly empowered in decision making. Examples include:<br><br>**Cm** (Commitment) Authorizing head (e.g., Executive Director) reports to Board and/or authorizing staff makes high-stakes recommendations directly to the Board.<br><br>• History of long-tenured senior leadership, including multiple long-tenured executive directors (typically 5+ years).<br><br>• Senior authorizing leadership has needed exemptions from "parent" organization policies, if any, in staff hiring, development, and termination.<br><br>• Authorizing office is not subject to institutional forced placement (formally or informally pressured). | • Set a tone of urgency, provide a buffer from political and other distractions, and build bridges to external sources of information and support.<br><br>• Clear conceptual agreement between senior authorizing staff and board on purposes of authorizing and decision-making alignment. |

| BOARD RELATIONS | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| • Board subcommittees help staff with high-stakes decisions including serving as a thought partner and facilitating larger board decision making. | • N/A |

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| **Jg**<br>3<br>Judgment<br><br>Staff develop explicit strategies to ensure a shared understanding of and expertise in quality authorizing. Examples include:<br><br>• New hires are trained in more than just their role (i.e., cross-training on other authorizing functions).<br><br>• Cross-team work ("all hands on deck" work) is explicit and required, and leads to "bench strength."<br><br>• Authorizing staff development is a critical organizational commitment and tends to be developed around the needs of individual staff members aligned with organizational goals.<br><br>• Staff attend and present at major conferences.<br><br>• Specific and concrete steps are taken to ensure alignment among staff (e.g., retreats, re-norming exercises), and avoid decisions by anecdote or opinion. | • Authorizing staff, not larger parent organization, drives professional development.<br><br>• Parent organization provides relevant professional development opportunities typically outside of authorizing, but are still relevant to staff (e.g., trainings on new state laws/policies, human resources).<br><br>• Authorizers have multiple examples and an organizational culture of "promotion from within."<br><br>• The number of staff dedicated to authorizing generally and to specific authorizing functions varied across authorizers, but each ensured enough staff to manage core authorizing functions. |

| APPLICATION DEVELOPMENT | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| • Authorizer provides denied applicants detailed feedback to (a) provide a public record of why an applicant was denied and (b) assist the applicant in reapplying in a later cycle. Denying an applicant (with clear feedback on the reasons for that denial) is not seen as a negative outcome for the authorizer.<br><br>• When conditional approval is granted, its purpose is to specify technical changes to the proposal that need to be made, not as a method to allow the applicant to further develop and improve their proposal. | • View application process as an "iterative" process. It is not uncommon for a denied applicant to reapply in a future application round.<br><br>• Applicants are encouraged to contact the authorizer for informal conversations regarding the application process. Authorizers may also provide formal applicant training specific to the steps in their application process and common errors prior applicants have made. They do not, however, provide evaluative feedback on any individual application prior to submission.<br><br>• Authorizer has a multi-stage process in which applicants are provided feedback at each stage and are permitted to respond to feedback during the process.<br><br>• Authorizer has an application amendment process and/or awards conditional approval to strong applicants, allowing some minor additional development prior to opening.<br><br>• Authorizer gives the applicant the opportunity to withdraw the application prior to a formal notice of denial. |

**Le** ¹ Leadership

| TRANSPARENCY | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| • Authorizer provides applicants and the public detailed information about the application process including timelines, evaluation criteria, previously submitted and reviewed applications, feedback and correspondence with prior applicants, and recordings of board meetings and application hearings. | • N/A |

## APPLICATION STAFFING

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Specific authorizing staff are assigned to oversee the application evaluation process.<br><br>• Authorizing and/or other parent organization staff members responsible for access and equity questions/issues are involved in application review.<br><br>• Reviewers receive detailed training on the application criteria and "normed" regarding what constitutes a successful application. | • Staff from across the larger parent organization participates in application evaluation process (i.e., not just the staff assigned to "authorizing"), at the direction of senior authorizing staff.<br><br>• Multiple reviewers evaluate each application.<br><br>• Reviewers are trained on the application criteria.<br><br>• Application reviewers come from different professional backgrounds and have diverse expertise, but are not necessarily "external" to the authorizer. |

## APPLICATION CRITERIA, DUE DILIGENCE, AND SCORING

| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
|---|---|
| • All application requirements have associated evaluation criteria and are formally evaluated.<br><br>• The application only includes elements necessary to evaluate the quality of the application.<br><br>• Evaluation criteria describe both the rigorous standard and the specific information required to meet the standard.<br><br>**Jg³** Judgment • Authorizer focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of each applicant and reaches an evidence-based recommendation via discussion, debate, and professional judgment.<br><br>**Jg³** Judgment • Authorizer ensures that all parts of the application are internally coherent and reinforcing. It does not evaluate an application solely by its ability to meet standards in the discrete areas of education, business/finances, and organizational capacity.<br><br>• Authorizer does not have stated preferences for certain school missions or types of educational models. The authorizer may identify geographic areas or communities of educational need, but does not specify a preference for specific types of schools.<br><br>• Has different requirements depending on the type of application received (e.g., start-up, replication), in-portfolio versus out-of-portfolio replications, type of school proposed (e.g., virtual, Alternative Education Campus [AEC]) and who is involved in the application (e.g., charter management organization [CMO], education management organization [EMO], independent). | • Authorizer has systems to conduct due diligence on the performance of existing operators.<br><br>• Reviewers do not simply "score" the application, but identify strengths and weaknesses in each application.<br><br>• Require applicants to demonstrate community outreach and demand for the school. Demonstrating outreach and demand can be done through a variety of mediums including community hearings, surveys, and other sources of evidence of demand presented within the written application. Pointing to less than adequate academic performance among similar schools in an area is not enough to demonstrate demand and insufficient in demonstrating community outreach. All authorizers saw value in outreach and demand, although some noted it's also in statute and not discretionary. |

## APPLICANT INTERVIEW

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Authorizers do not interview all applicants, but do interview all "qualified" applicants based on pre-existing standards established by the authorizer.<br><br>• Authorizers are systematic and formal about developing interview questions. Questions are developed ahead of the interview, are based on a thorough review of the written application, are coordinated across interviewers to eliminate redundancy, and are often scripted.<br><br>• Interview team looks for both the content of the answers and also who answers the question. They look for and evaluate the degree to which there is broad understanding of the application, issues raised, and if appropriate people are answering key questions (e.g., if the CMO/EMO is answering questions that board members should answer). | • The applicant interview is an essential component of the application evaluation process.<br><br>• Authorizer has specific "red flags" (that vary across authorizers) that indicate that an applicant group lacks the capacity to operate a school.<br><br>• Interview questions are prepared ahead of time, are tailored to the applicant, and designed to gather more information about application weaknesses or areas of the application that lack clarity.<br><br>• Interviews are in-person. Multiple members of the applicant group are asked to attend the interview and multiple authorizing staff members participate in the interview. |

## APPLICATION DECISION MAKING

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Final submitted (and approved) application is a detailed blueprint for school opening and operation. Very little is left for later development. | • Authorizer relies on successive stages and multiple sources of information to reach application decisions, and applications can be denied at each stage.<br><br>• Authorizing staff submits recommendations for approval to the Board, but makes denial decisions without board input. |

## PRE-OPENING PROCESS

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Unlike other areas of authorizing practice, authorizers are very hands on (sometimes quite intensively) in the pre-opening process, including directing schools on areas for change, collaborating with school support organizations, providing explicit informational and step-by-step resources for schools, and advocating on behalf of schools when necessary.<br><br>• Authorizers use the pre-opening process to build relationships, set expectations, and provide technical assistance to schools. | • Authorizer has a pre-opening process to identify whether a school has demonstrated it is ready to open.<br><br>• Authorizer isn't afraid to hold schools accountable for not successfully completing pre-opening process, including not letting a school open. |

**Le** 1 Leadership

## CONTINUOUS REFLECTION AND IMPROVEMENT

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • Authorizer reviews its application process after each cycle to improve its efficiency and validity. The authorizer typically makes small technical updates to its application process after each cycle, and when reviews suggest a need for substantial changes, makes such changes after that cycle.<br><br>• Authorizer seeks input from staff, reviewers, applicants, and the community regarding changes to the application process. | • N/A |

## MONITORING

| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
|---|---|
| • Ongoing monitoring is clearly aligned with contract/charter expectations. Schools know exactly what the authorizer is monitoring and why. Similarly, because authorizer intervention is aligned with contract expectations, schools knew what things would and would not lead to authorizer intervention (although how an authorizer intervenes/responds varied; see section on use of professional judgment).<br><br>• Authorizers require detailed plans, of which every part is analyzed, for student enrollment processes and systems. Plans are typically approved annually, but the authorizer collects data to identify issues more frequently, typically monthly or quarterly.<br><br>• Authorizers have internal authorizing staff with an explicit focus on equity and access (although this was typically not the staff members' only responsibility area). Specific to ongoing oversight/monitoring, such staff is responsible for school monitoring, performance framework data collection, and renewal decision-making information.<br><br>• Frequently collect data/monitor (monthly or quarterly) and have internal capacity to tell the difference between concerning financial performance data (e.g., data that might trigger a conversation with or notice to the school) compared to serious short- or long-term financial crises (e.g., data that required an immediate response from the school and/or immediate authorizer action). | • Authorizers have conversations with schools when any issues are identified prior to issuing any formal notices (and many don't issue formal notices unless circumstances are dire and/or school is unresponsive)<br><br>• Authorizers used a number of different methods to collect and hold schools accountable for organizational oversight. While an individual authorizer typically does not use all methods, a list of commonly used methods includes meetings with schools, written inquiries, stakeholder surveys and focus groups, attending governing board meetings, online monitoring systems in which schools uploaded data, site visits, and an annual report from schools that included reporting on organizational performance indicators.<br><br>• Alignment between staff operating the authorizer's monitoring and intervention system (with a preference for the same person or people managing both). Such a system provides schools with a monitoring-intervention process that seemed to increase the chances that corrective actions were aligned with findings from ongoing monitoring. |

**Le** [1]
Leadership

## CHARTER FOCUS AND AMENDMENTS

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • N/A | • Contracts/charters are limited in scope and focused on only two things: (a) what is required by state law and (b) what is necessary to hold a school accountable as determined by the authorizer.<br><br>• Authorizers set a high bar for charter amendments, reserving approval for changes only to areas deemed "material." In addition, authorizers intentionally limit "material" areas that require formal authorizer approval to maximize school autonomy. |

## SCHOOL FEEDBACK AND SITE VISITS

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • A strong feedback loops exist between the authorizer's monitoring system and schools, which gives schools clarity on where they stand relative to authorizer expectations.<br><br>• Authorizers provide schools with feedback documenting areas of strength or concern through a variety of mediums (site visit reports, informal conversations, compliance reports) immediately or shortly after monitoring activities occurred.<br><br>• Use formal site visits to collect information about schools, and use the site visit process to facilitate difficult conversations with schools when needed. Information from site visits are used to provide a more robust assessment of school performance, and often augment and amplify other quantitative performance information. Data collected during site visits are intentionally and specifically planned, and site visits are not organized as a "gotcha" exercise. | • Authorizer publishes, at least annually, individual school performance reports aligned to framework expectations on at least academics, operations, and finances. |

## PERFORMANCE MEASURES & EXPECTATIONS

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • N/A | • Performance measures are legally binding in some way, meaning they can be legally enforced via an accountability plan or performance framework. Those measures are typically included as part of the contract between an authorizer and school (or incorporated by reference) or other means by which the authorizer had legal standing to enforce performance expectations.<br><br>• Schools can establish school specific goals that are approved by the authorizer, but authorizers varied in their encouragement of schools establishing their own indicators.<br><br>• Academic accountability frameworks typically include measures of student growth, student proficiency, post-secondary indicators, college and career readiness indicators and school specific goals. Authorizers establish a common set of required academic goals (and, as noted previously, schools can set additional goals if they choose to).<br><br>• Financial accountability measures include both near-term and sustainability measures.<br><br>• In addition to governance, other common operational areas included facilities requirements, requirements to adhere to applicable law, requirements for special populations (i.e., reporting requirements and adherence to applicable law), enrollment process compliance and results, reporting and compliance requirements, student health and safety expectations, requirements for the school environment, teacher and staff licensing requirements, and financial management reporting requirements.<br><br>• There is variance between authorizers on the degree to which financial and operational goals are uniformly applied or school-specific. |

| RENEWAL | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| • N/A | • Academic performance expectations for renewal represent the bar for a quality school, not the minimum expectations to avoid closure.<br><br>• Ensure schools are not held accountable for expectations that are not present or known throughout the charter term (i.e., "no surprises").<br><br>• To ensure renewal decisions are unambiguous, authorizers have clear alignment of renewal documents, renewal criteria, renewal rubrics, renewal application ratings, performance frameworks, charter contract clarity on renewals, and recommendations. |

| EXPANSION & REPLICATION | |
| --- | --- |
| *Strong Portfolios Only* | *Both Strong and Average Portfolios* |
| **Jg** 3 Judgment  Authorizer's criteria and standards for school operator past performance is exceptionally clear. Schools seeking to replicate or expand know if they should even apply or not.<br><br>• Replication application is not automatically approved, even for schools that meet past performance criteria and standards. The review for potential replicators is different but never automatic and never without a thorough review. Decisions for replication are based on a number of factors (e.g., capacity to replicate, potential location), but are most heavily weighted on past academic, financial, and organizational performance.<br><br>**Le** 1 Leadership  • Authorizers provide incentives for replication or expansion (e.g., reducing per-student oversight fee and expedited application process, charter amendment process rather than new or expedited application process, access to facilities). | • In-portfolio replicators (i.e., those already in the authorizer's portfolio) have an expedited application review process.<br><br>• Potential replicators, particularly in-portfolio replicators, are not required to submit any information the authorizer already possesses or can easily acquire. |

## CLOSURE

| Strong Portfolios Only | Both Strong and Average Portfolios |
|---|---|
| • When a school's performance meets the authorizer's standards for closure, authorizing staff prefers to work with the school's board to relinquish the charter rather than initiate a formal closure by the authorizer.<br><br>• Authorizer informs the school and its board of underperformance years in advance of the end of the school's charter term. Through multiple feedback loops described in other sections, including formal face-to-face meetings with the school leader and school's board, the authorizer ensures the school is aware of performance that may lead to non-renewal, typically multiple years in advance of the school's renewal cycle.<br><br>• Authorizer takes an active role when a school is closed. This can include trying to find a replacement operator and project managing (either directly or through other organizations) the process of ensuring students have access to another school. | • N/A |

**Le** ¹
Leadership

nacsa