

Charter school authorizers—over 1,000 nationwide—are as diverse as the public schools in their portfolios. Some authorize only one or two schools, while others have hundreds of schools in their purview, serving tens of thousands of students. The profession includes school districts, independent statewide boards, universities, not-for-profits, state education agencies, and other non-educational government entities.

Despite the variety in authorizer size, resources, and institutional setting, their day-to-day work and core responsibilities remain constant. Authorizers must strive to uphold high standards, promote school autonomy, and protect student interests and public trust. Across the country, authorizers aim to improve their practice in the service of their ultimate goal: high quality education for all charter school students. Authorizers that organize and manage their work around strong practices are more likely to approve successful schools, more likely to preserve autonomy, and more likely to close schools that fail to perform.

In the more than 25 years since charter schools were first created, we have all learned a great deal about which authorizing practices matter the most. This knowledge is borne out by authorizer experience, reinforced in NACSA's daily work with authorizers, confirmed by research, and embodied in the tools we have developed to guide the profession.

## NACSA's 12 Essential Practices for every authorizer:

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 performance 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**

The cornerstone of these practices is NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, first published in 2004 and regularly updated as the field evolves. This is the foundational text for authorizers, who are charged with promoting school quality through flexibility over inputs and accountability for outcomes. Increasingly, *Principles & Standards (P&S)* has also become a guidepost for education advocates and lawmakers who craft and revise state charter school laws and policies.

*Principles & Standards* is grounded in **three Core Principles** that guide the complex work of charter authorizing:

- Maintain high expectations about student achievement and school performance
- Uphold school autonomy
- Protect student and public interests

In 2011, NACSA went a step further and culled from *P&S* a set of Essential Practices—recommended for all authorizers—that reflect the **five domains of effective authorizing**:

- Agency commitment and capacity
- Application process and decision making
- Performance contracting
- Ongoing oversight and evaluation
- Revocation and renewal decision making

These 12 practices are basic, minimum expectations considered essential by the most successful authorizers nationally—not complex challenges that will take years to implement. NACSA reports annually on progress made by the nation's authorizers in adopting these achievable practices. Any of the nation's authorizers can use these Essential Practices as a tool for self-evaluation and to spur improvements in their own work—this week, this month, this year.

**NACSA's Essential Practice Spotlight series includes this overview and 12 separate documents—released individually over the course of a year—that put each of the practices into a brief and bright spotlight.**

**Each *Spotlight* contains these features:**

<i>Center Stage:</i>	<i>Scene:</i>	<i>Rehearsal:</i>	<i>Action:</i>	<i>Applause:</i>
The Essential Practice in the Spotlight	The Essential Practice set into the context of <i>Principles &amp; Standards</i>	How to put this Essential Practice in place in your authorizing shop	Recent research findings from NACSA's Annual Survey	Why this Essential Practice matters for quality schools

To learn more, visit [www.qualitycharters.org](http://www.qualitycharters.org)



*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #1**

Have a published and available mission for quality authorizing.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer states a clear mission for quality authorizing." This Essential Practice falls under the first of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Agency Commitment and Capacity: "A quality authorizer engages in chartering as a means to foster excellent schools that meet identified needs, clearly prioritizes a commitment to excellence in education and in authorizing practices, and creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary to conduct its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

Read some of the best mission statements we've seen, and download a process for adopting your own at NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#).

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, more than three-fourths (77 percent) of large authorizers surveyed had a mission statement.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Every effective organization needs a clearly articulated mission statement to guide its work. For authorizers, inundated by the nuts and bolts of their daily work, a strong mission statement helps remind them why they are in the business: not to process paper, play politics, or inhibit school success—but to expand educational opportunity for students, and change lives.

A simple, compelling mission statement serves as an authorizer's "North Star," guiding decisions by keeping minds focused on the real goal. A mission statement focused on quality authorizing can be especially important in prioritizing this work for the vast majority of authorizers that are part of agencies with a broader purpose than chartering schools alone.

A quality authorizer not only creates but also communicates its mission through public statements and reports—and perhaps most important, in staff meetings and conversations at the water cooler, and in meetings with board members and other decision-makers. More than a slogan, the mission communicates the authorizer's core purpose and public responsibilities, guides the way the authorizer does business and makes decisions, and sets a standard by which its own performance can be assessed.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Many organizations develop over time their own lingo or vocabulary for their work: words or phrases that reflect values and express aims. But there's no reason an authorizer yet to implement this Essential Practice has to start from scratch. With over 25 years of experience in this sector of public education, quite a few authorizers have developed strong mission statements. Here's one example from the Indiana Charter School Board: "To authorize and hold accountable a portfolio of high-performing charter schools in which students achieve high levels of growth and graduate prepared for college and careers."

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #2**

Have staff assigned to authorizing within the organization or by contract.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer employs competent personnel at a staffing level appropriate and sufficient to carry out all authorizing responsibilities in accordance with national standards, and commensurate with the scale of the charter school portfolio." This Essential Practice falls under the first of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Agency Commitment and Capacity: "A quality authorizer engages in chartering as a means to foster excellent schools that meet identified needs, clearly prioritizes a commitment to excellence in education and in authorizing practices, and creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary to conduct its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

Compare your office's staff to full-time equivalent (FTE) per school trends for authorizers of your type in NACSA's [State of Charter Authorizing](#). Explore NACSA's [Human Capital offerings](#).

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, all large authorizers surveyed—100 percent—had staff dedicated to authorizing.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Quality charter school authorizing requires an unusually broad skill set: everything from academic knowledge to statistics to community relations. With sufficient and talented staff, an authorizer has the human capital power needed to face policy and practice challenges. Conversely, the soundest policies and best practices mean little without capable staff to implement them.

Every authorizer has to find ways of finding and deploying that expertise, especially at such peak times as application or renewal season. The job may involve few or many FTEs on the core staff, depending on the size of the portfolio, and these may be supplemented by on-demand resources through contracts. For authorizers located in school districts and universities, additional talent can be borrowed from other offices.

But there must be enough designated, full-time staff to build and maintain expertise in authorizing; to conduct consistent, ongoing quality assurance; to manage oversight; and to maintain institutional knowledge and stability. This is serious business and a public responsibility, and policymakers need to invest the resources needed for authorizers to do it correctly.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Many authorizing offices exist within the structure of larger education agencies or other public or private institutions. One benefit of that arrangement is the ready access to other management and administrative tools and support. Another may be the potential collegiality and brainstorming potential with neighboring offices also working to provide a public good.

There is a danger, though, that the work of authorizing will not get the priority it needs and that staff won't develop sufficient expertise. That's why having staff dedicated to authorizing is necessary even in very large organizations.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #3**

Sign a contract with each school.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer executes a contract with a legally incorporated governing board independent of the authorizer." This Essential Practice falls under the third of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Performance Contracting: "A quality authorizer executes contracts with charter schools that articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, funding, administration and oversight, outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms. The contract is an essential document, separate from the charter application, that establishes the legally binding agreement and terms under which the school will operate and be held accountable."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

If you are like most authorizers and already signing contracts, make sure it's not simply the application re-purposed, but a separate document that sets clear terms and expectations for performance. Check out NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#) where you can find NACSA's Core Charter School Contract and take courses in the essentials of performance contracting.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

Most large authorizers surveyed by NACSA in 2014—92 percent—signed contracts with their schools.

## Applause: Why it Matters

The relationship between a charter school and its authorizer is contractual. A quality authorizer executes a performance contract with each school it authorizes. This contract—a charter—is a legally binding agreement that permits the school to operate and articulates the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, funding, administration and oversight, outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms.

A charter contract is a document separate from a charter application. Simply signing an approved application and calling it a contract may seem like a good shortcut, but this will likely lead to problems down the road. Without a contract, schools may not understand the terms by which they will be held accountable, and authorizers will have difficulty enforcing expectations. By setting clear terms, a charter contract reduces misunderstandings and helps guide a school and its authorizer through the course of their relationship. A strong charter contract benefits all stakeholders—schools, authorizers, students and families, and the public.

Charter contracts make school-based autonomy and accountability real, and thus are critical for making the charter school concept work. Charter contracts protect school autonomy and safeguard schools from inappropriate intervention while at the same time establishing the performance standards that enable authorizers to hold schools accountable for results. They make clear the school's obligation to uphold the public trust and protect students' rights.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Charter school contracts shouldn't just be developed and then put on the shelf. Authorizers should regularly refer to and use their contracts as they conduct ongoing oversight and monitoring and whenever a dispute arises with a school or when intervention is needed. For this reason, charter contracts should be clear and concise and shouldn't require consulting an attorney to understand.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #4**

Have established, documented criteria for the evaluation of charter applications.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that...follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria." This Essential Practice falls under the second of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Application Process and Decision Making: "A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that includes clear application questions and guidance; follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants charters only to applicants who demonstrate strong capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

Craft criteria aligned to the key components of your charter application. NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#) has resources to help authorizers develop strong application evaluation materials, including an overview course on Application Process and Decision Making, Core Evaluation Criteria that accompany NACSA's Core Application, and examples of criteria used by strong authorizers across the country.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

All large authorizers surveyed by NACSA in 2014 (100 percent) have application evaluation criteria.

## Applause: Why it Matters

In the quest to provide new quality public education options, solid evaluation criteria serve two major purposes. First and most importantly, they help ensure that only schools likely to improve educational outcomes for students are granted a charter. They create a methodical, merit-based, and rigorous structure for reviewing academic, operational, and financial plans, and guide the authorizer towards rigorous yet fair judgments about each. When the criteria are clearly communicated to applicants, as they should be, they provide petitioners a clear sense of what is expected of them and what constitutes a strong proposal.

Specific, publicized evaluation criteria also help authorizers ensure consistency in application reviews. They are worthwhile in themselves, but also are a strong shield against questions of bias and favoritism that could form the basis for an appeal of a decision to deny a charter request.

Establishing common standards that all applicants must meet for approval—making sure applicants and the authorizer both understand them—helps identify which schools will truly serve students best.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Authorizers sometimes fear that publishing their application evaluation criteria will weaken the rigor of their process by telegraphing to schools what is needed for approval. But evaluating a charter school application isn't as simple as completing a checklist and the criteria for evaluation shouldn't be a secret. So long as an authorizer has a strong, comprehensive evaluation process in place that goes beyond just what's on paper and ensures that applicants understand what they plan to do and have the capacity to do it, they need not worry that applicants will game the system.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #5**

Publish application timelines and materials.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer implements a charter application process that is open, well publicized, and transparent, and is organized around clear, realistic timelines." This Essential Practice falls under the second of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Application Process and Decision Making: "A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that includes clear application questions and guidance; follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants charters only to applicants who demonstrate strong capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

First hone in on your application timelines and materials. Are they clear and realistic? Then make sure they are widely and effectively publicized. If you need to strengthen your application materials and process, check out NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#), which includes an overview course on Application Process & Decision Making and NACSA's Core Charter School Application and Evaluation Criteria.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

Most large authorizers (96 percent) who responded to NACSA's 2014 survey tend to publish application timelines and materials.

## Applause: Why it Matters

A strong application process doesn't just end strong, with comprehensive reviews and sound decisions. It starts strong, with steps taken up front to ensure fairness and transparency. It is critical that all stakeholders—prospective applicants, the public, parents, and policymakers—know that the process is underway, understand its procedures and requirements, and have the opportunity to offer input and feedback. Sufficient time must be allocated to each of these steps so that everyone has a realistic opportunity to participate.

Transparency is not only important for public accountability; it is also a building block for quality. A comprehensive, detailed application process with clear guidance will enable applicants to create stronger proposals that contain the information authorizers need to make sound decisions, while encouraging applicants to undertake the rigorous planning needed to launch and sustain successful schools.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Depending on an authorizer's institutional setting, sound communication models and dissemination mechanisms may already exist. In those cases, an authorizer can capitalize on existing resources to widely publish and disseminate application timelines and materials. For authorizers who work more independently with less or no access to such resources, creating them from scratch does not have to be cumbersome. Publishing application materials can be as simple as posting them on the authorizer's website and on social media sites. Authorizers can also collaborate with stakeholders like charter support organizations, local foundations, and the state education agency to share their materials and get the word out about their process.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #6**

Interview all qualified charter applicants.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer rigorously evaluates each application through...a substantive in-person interview with the applicant group." This Essential Practice falls under the second of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Application Process and Decision Making: "A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that includes clear application questions and guidance; follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants charters only to applicants who demonstrate strong capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

It takes significant people power to interview applicants. So make sure that investment is well spent. NACSA has created a Core Resource: Charter School Applicant Interviewer Guidance to help you design a good process or improve the one you have. Find it on NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#), along with an overview course on Application Process & Decision Making.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, 92 percent of large authorizers who participated in our national survey interviewed all qualified applicants.

## Applause: Why it Matters

No matter how thorough the paper process is, nothing takes the place of looking applicants in the eye and asking detailed questions about their plans and capacities.

A substantive interview with the entire applicant team is essential for the authorizer to vet qualified applicants, follow up on questions raised by the written proposal, probe for detail, and evaluate an applicant's capacity to execute the school plan it describes. Interviewers should enter with a clear idea of what they still need to learn about the applicant, and a plan for getting this information, with questions designed to clarify and verify information presented in the written application.

Information from the interview can substantially change reviewer evaluations of a proposed school—in either direction. A conversation may reveal that a passage in the proposal was simply copied from another source, with little thought or understanding of the practice itself or the changed context. Sometimes an interview will reveal that an applicant actually has greater capacities than was conveyed in the written proposal. Both cases call for some reassessment.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

NACSA recommends that authorizers interview every applicant they are considering for approval. Authorizers should only deny interviews to applicants who are ineligible to hold a charter or whose applications are incomplete or wholly devoid of merit. Authorizers who receive a very large number of applications may choose to limit the number of interviews conducted in order to conserve limited resources but should still make every effort to interview all qualified applicants. Some authorizers have developed effective and appropriate systems and processes for interviewing only those applicants that meet a minimum threshold of quality. Authorizers considering this approach should make certain that the standards used are as objective as possible and are clearly communicated as part of the application process. Authorizers should not deny an applicant an interview arbitrarily or without first making a determination that the applicant's application fails to meet minimum approval requirements.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #7**

Use expert panels that include external members to review charter applications.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer engages, for both written application reviews and applicant interviews, highly competent teams of internal and external evaluators with relevant educational, organizational (governance and management), financial, and legal expertise, as well as a thorough understanding of the essential principles of charter school autonomy and accountability." This Essential Practice falls under the second of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Application Process and Decision Making: "A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that...follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants charters only to applicants who demonstrate strong capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

To maximize the contributions of both internal and external evaluation team members in your application review process, prepare them thoughtfully. Refer to NACSA's *Knowledge Core*, where a *Core Resource: Charter School Applicant Interviewer Guidance* has ideas on how to orient all members, as well as an overview course on *Application Process & Decision Making*.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, three-quarters of large authorizers (76 percent) who participated in our national survey use expert panels that include external members.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Strong charter school applications include a comprehensive educational program, a solid business plan, and a clear plan for effective governance and operations. They may also reflect an array of pedagogical philosophies and practices. To ensure each of these components is properly evaluated, a quality authorizer creates an application review team that possesses both knowledge of charter schooling and expertise in each specialized area that the team will see.

But it is the rare authorizer whose internal staff can cover all these bases, especially when dealing with more than a handful of applications at once. For this reason—and to minimize the likelihood of bias and limit any perception of undue influence—the evaluation team should also have at least some members who are independent of the authorizer. Authorizers should also ensure that each individual member has no real or perceived conflict of interest regarding any particular applicant.

Well-qualified independent reviewers bolster the integrity of the application process and help ensure it remains focused on the quality of each application, independent of political connections or factors unrelated to the merit of the proposals. External experts should be trained prior to the evaluation and can often be recruited on a volunteer basis. Successful charter school operators often are excellent contributors to review teams, because they know intimately what it takes to launch and sustain high-performing schools and have a strong interest in safeguarding the good reputation of charter schools collectively.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Authorizers should develop a process for selecting internal and external expert reviewers on evaluation teams, including a recruitment plan, required qualifications, and a selection process. The process need not be burdensome or expensive, but it should be formalized and organized to ensure high quality participants. The extra planning needed to form panels of expert evaluators will pay off through better assessment of all aspects of an application.

Once internal and external experts have been selected, they must be prepped accordingly, with guidance on how to read and assess the written application, and specific tasks for pre-interview preparation. The presence and participation of both internal and external participants in the actual interview is important, and requires a team orientation on the structure of the interview and role each individual will play.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #8**

Grant initial charter terms of  
five years only.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Index of Essential Practices 2014*: "A quality authorizer grants charter contracts for an initial term of five operating years or longer only with periodic high-stakes reviews every five years." This Essential Practice falls under the third of five domains used to organize NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: Performance Contracting: "A quality authorizer executes contracts with charter schools that articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, funding, administration and oversight, outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences, and other material terms."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

When approving new schools, grant initial terms of five years. Check out NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#), to review our [Core Charter School Contract](#) and learn about performance contracting.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, 61 percent of large authorizers who responded to our national survey granted initial charter terms of five years, making this the least adopted of all 12 Essential Practices.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Although some state laws allow or require shorter or longer terms—or don't establish a term at all—there are good reasons for an initial charter term of five years. A five-year initial term allows a school to develop beyond its startup phase and to produce a record of performance needed for thorough evaluation and high-stakes decision-making.

Terms shorter than five years might appear to create greater accountability, but can actually hinder a school's ability to raise money, recruit students, attract strong teachers, and establish a comprehensive performance record. Shorter terms also increase administrative costs by requiring more frequent renewal processes and may erode autonomy by tempting authorizers to impose their own prescriptions for improvement.

Terms longer than five years can allow low-performing schools to escape or delay accountability. If state law calls for initial terms of 10 or 15 years, or permits longer terms after the first renewal, authorizers should still undertake a high-stakes review at least every five years equal in scope and rigor to the review a school undergoes at the end of its charter term.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

While this Essential Practice specifies an *initial* five-year term, there is flexibility on subsequent terms, especially for high-performing schools. Research indicates that most operators that perform well in their start-up years have a high probability of continuing that success. For these schools, a subsequent term longer than five years may be an important option to encourage and reward high quality outcomes. Differentiating term lengths based on performance also allows the authorizer to focus on low-performing schools.

Even when longer terms are used, however, authorizers should conduct a rigorous performance review every five years for the life of the charter. The use of a comprehensive performance framework that provides an annual evaluation of achievement and growth is one good way to reduce the burden of these periodic reviews for schools and the authorizer.

Reduced or 'probationary' renewals in exceptional circumstances are another possibility. Some high-quality authorizers use short renewal terms when the data or trends create substantial uncertainty about the school's performance. In these instances, additional points of annual performance data are likely to clarify the school's standing.

## NACSA's 12 Essential Practices for every authorizer:

Across the country, authorizers aim to improve their practice in the service of their ultimate goal: high quality education for all charter school students. In the 25 years since charter schools were first created, we have all learned a great deal about which authorizing practices matter the most. From our nationally-recognized *Principles & Standards*, NACSA has culled a set of **Essential Practices**—recommended for all authorizers, regardless of size, resources, or institutional setting. These 12 practices are basic, minimum expectations considered essential by successful authorizers nationally—not complex challenges that will take years to implement. Any authorizer can use these as a tool for self-evaluation and to spur improvements in their work—this week, this month, this year.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #9**

Require and/or examine annual, independent financial audits of its charter schools.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer requires and reviews annual financial audits of schools, conducted by a qualified independent auditor." This Essential Practice falls under the fourth of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation: "A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that competently evaluates performance and monitors compliance; ensures schools' legally entitled autonomy; protects student rights; informs intervention, revocation, and renewal decisions; and provides annual public reports on school performance."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

Nearly every authorizer nationwide already requires an annual audit, showing just how essential this Essential Practice truly is. Refer to *Knowledge Core*, where our Issue Brief *Measuring Charter School Financial Health* provides guidance on the use of audits.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, 100 percent of large authorizers who responded to our national survey require an annual financial audit from each school.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Charter schools are entrusted with responsibility for millions of dollars of public funds, so they must be accountable for sound fiscal management and appropriate use of public resources. Annual financial audits allow authorizers to assess whether a charter school is living up to its financial responsibilities and fulfilling the public trust.

Annual audits help the authorizer evaluate a school's short- and long-term financial viability and the effectiveness of its internal controls. By collecting and reviewing annual audits, authorizers can be alerted to problems that otherwise would not be apparent and can be proactive in addressing them.

Because an audit happens after the fiscal year closes, many authorizers supplement the audit requirement with regular review of financial statements throughout the year to get a clearer picture of month-to-month spending, cash balances, and other indicators of real-time financial health or stress.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

It is not enough for authorizers to require and collect annual independent audits. They also need to review them for red flags and use them to evaluate each school's fiscal management practices and financial health. Authorizers should establish clear audit scope requirements to ensure audits include all information needed for annual evaluation. For information about the critical role that independent audits play in the evaluation of charter school organizational and financial performance, refer to NACSA's [Core Performance Framework and Guidance](#).

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #10**

Have established renewal criteria.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer clearly communicates to schools the criteria for charter revocation, renewal, and non-renewal decisions that are consistent with the charter contract." This Essential Practice falls under the fifth of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Revocation and Renewal Decision Making: "A quality authorizer designs and implements a transparent and rigorous process that uses comprehensive academic, financial, and operational performance data to make merit-based renewal decisions, and revokes charters when necessary to protect student and public interests."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

You've made the crucial decision to grant a charter. Now make sure you establish clear performance criteria in the contract so the school understands what is expected and there are no surprises at renewal. NACSA's *Knowledge Core* has resources on renewal criteria and other aspects of the renewal process.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, nearly all large authorizers (96 percent) responding to our national survey have established renewal criteria.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Charter schools should from the outset have a clear understanding of what it will take to earn renewal of their charter. The contract expresses a charter school's commitment to achieve certain academic and operational goals and outcomes; renewal criteria state the standards that will govern the renewal decision itself. They should answer the question, "How good is good enough for this school to continue?"

Renewal criteria should be just as transparent as those guiding the application process. Whether through a set of protocols applicable to all schools, or through specific criteria addressing a particular school's goals, they should be in place early enough for schools to plan a full charter term's worth of activities and instruction around the achievement of renewal targets.

Renewal criteria should form the bases of authorizers' annual reporting to schools and the public on each charter school's performance and progress. There should be several years of relevant data in hand when the renewal decision-making process starts.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Renewal criteria don't paint a black-and-white picture. In addition to meeting academic performance thresholds, schools may have to show a positive trajectory, fulfillment of mission-specific objectives, and attainment of organizational and financial benchmarks. Authorizers still must exercise judgment about each case, but that judgment is far better informed when all parties agree about the location of the goal posts. Clearly established renewal criteria help authorizers make high stakes decisions that are consistent and predictable and give schools clarity about expectations.

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*Center Stage: The Essential Practice in the Spotlight*

**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #11**

Have established revocation criteria.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer clearly communicates to schools the criteria for charter revocation, renewal, and non-renewal decisions that are consistent with the charter contract." This Essential Practice falls under the fifth of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Revocation and Renewal Decision Making: "A quality authorizer designs and implements a transparent and rigorous process that uses comprehensive academic, financial, and operational performance data to make merit-based renewal decisions, and revokes charters when necessary to protect student and public interests."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

Part of the charter promise is the fact that failing schools can be closed so those students get a better opportunity at a successful school. Set yourself up to make that tough decision with complete information, known to all. Replicable tools are on NACSA's [Knowledge Core](#).

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

Most large authorizers responding to our 2014 national survey—92 percent—have established revocation criteria.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Charter schools agree to accept greater accountability for student outcomes in exchange for greater autonomy over inputs. When schools fail to meet the goals in their charter contracts, they risk non-renewal. When schools grievously abuse their autonomy by violating the law or the public trust, revocation is the ultimate accountability sanction.

Revocation and closure decisions are often highly contentious and put a spotlight on the soundness of an authorizer's practice. Clear, objective, and rigorous standards for revocation, combined with a transparent public process, help parents and community leaders both to see the evidence of a school's extreme underperformance or wrongdoing and to understand the necessity for urgent action to protect students.

Revocation criteria should be clearly articulated in the charter contract, and authorizers should create and publicize protocols that spell out the grounds for revocation and the procedures of revocation actions. These will help the authorizer defend and explain its actions to the school community if the authorizer must make the tough decision to terminate a charter prior to the end of its term.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Like renewal criteria, revocation criteria don't necessarily paint a black-and-white picture either. The emotional upheaval that a school closure represents for children, families, and entire school communities—even when data shows failure—only increases the importance of clearly defined criteria up front, and no surprises when revocation decisions are made. Authorizers still must exercise judgment about each case, but that judgment is far better informed when all parties agree at the outset not just what defines success, but what defines failure.

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**ESSENTIAL PRACTICE #12**

Provide an annual report to each school on its performance.

*Scene:*

*Essential Practice in Context*

From NACSA's *Principles & Standards*: "A quality authorizer provides an annual written report to each school, summarizing its performance and compliance to date and identifying areas of strength and areas needing improvement." This Essential Practice falls under the fourth of five domains used to organize all the *Principles & Standards*: Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation: "A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that competently evaluates performance and monitors compliance; ensures schools' legally entitled autonomy; protects student rights; informs intervention, revocation, and renewal decisions; and provides annual public reports on school performance."

*Rehearsal:*

*Putting this Essential Practice in Place*

You're already collecting performance data and other information to gauge progress. Now share it in useful ways with each school.

*Action: Essential Practice in Use*

In 2014, more than three-fourths of large authorizers responding to our national survey (79 percent) provided an annual report to each school on its performance.

## Applause: Why it Matters

Full 360-degree transparency promotes school quality. While charter schools keep track of their own performance, they also need to know how their authorizers are viewing their progress. When contracts contain explicit goals and authorizers create performance frameworks showing what acceptable progress looks like, it becomes relatively easy to give schools detailed annual feedback based on data the authorizer has collected over the past year. These annual reports should also give schools the opportunity to respond to, correct, or supplement the data to ensure a comprehensive, accurate record.

At the same time, the authorizer's annual report to each school is more than data. It can also provide a shout-out for a school that is ahead of the curve, or a timely reminder that a tune-up is needed. And because they are publicly available, these reports give parents, taxpayers, and policymakers good information for their own views and decisions about charter schools.

Most important, annual performance reports mean that authorizers are taking a routinely scheduled look at each school's status, accumulating the evidence needed to make sound renewal decisions, communicating clearly and regularly with schools on their performance, and keeping the public in the loop about how their public charter schools are doing.

## Director's Note: Some Added Perspective

Authorizers should consider capitalizing on the communications opportunities inherent in the distribution of annual reports. These reports can provide a convenient, graphic way to tell the story of charter school progress, or areas needing improvement, to various publics via traditional and social media outlets. Using the start of a new school year as a natural news peg, authorizers can share charter school performance data, reinforce central charter tenets, and dispel stubborn myths about funding, admission policies, or other issues of particular concern to your community. A communications campaign using select annual report data may also serve as a rallying force for community, foundation, or corporate involvement in the sector.

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