

Nevada: Trading One-Star Performance for Five-Star Accountability

Nevada's leaders, spurred by lagging charter school performance, have pushed through various rounds of policy reform during the past four years. Nevada's stakeholders—while realistic that this is a work in progress—are optimistic that these policy reforms will ultimately result in stronger student outcomes and protected public interests. Today, enrollment in quality charter schools is up, authorizing is seen as a profession rather than an activity, and the state is working to uphold strong academic standards for all charter schools.

CHALLENGES

Nevada charter school students were losing ground academically faster than in any other state, and the schools that were failing them were continuing to operate with little improvement and no accountability. The law did not give authorizers much direction outside of basic compliance monitoring.

” Nevada Stakeholders Said: “[The Department of Education] treated authorizing like any other state program...[F]inancial accountability was emphasized rather than student outcomes.”

POLICY FIXES

The Nevada State Public Charter School Authority, designed to be a model authorizer in the state, was created in 2011. Schools previously authorized by the Nevada State Department of Education were transferred to the new State Public Charter School Authority.

During the 2013 and 2015 legislative sessions, application and accountability measures were reformed in state law to ensure all authorizers did the following:

- **Use a team of knowledgeable reviewers to evaluate charter applications**
- **Use and develop charter contracts and performance frameworks with all their schools**
- **Use a separate renewal application that focuses on past performance**
- **Employ a default closure provision for persistently failing charter schools**
- **Publish annual reports on the performance of their portfolios of schools**
- **Be subject to authorizer sanctions for failure to adhere to authorizing standards**

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has since ranked Nevada's charter school law in the top third of all charter laws in the nation.¹

” Nevada Stakeholders Said: “...[W]e knew we needed to start with high-quality procedures that would result in decisions to open schools that have the highest probability of success for our kids.”

Academic Performance of State-Authorized Charter Schools Before & After Creation of Nevada State Public Charter School Authority



EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS

- **Quality Schools:** Nearly half of the schools authorized by the Authority have received a five-star rating, the highest possible² from the State of Nevada.
- **Quality Growth:** Between 2011 and 2015, the number of students served by four- and five-star charter schools statewide grew 147%.³
- **Accountability:** The default closure provision, while important to Nevada’s reform effort, represents the floor, not the ceiling of their expectations. Authorizers are able to enforce a strong standard for charter school renewal.

” Nevada Stakeholders Said: “It [the Authority] was the example of how to do it right. Authorizing in Nevada [went from being] focused on processes and procedures to being focused on outcomes for kids.”

THE ROAD AHEAD

- Nevada is poised to make significant student achievement gains.
- Nevada needs robust infrastructure and capacity to implement reforms.
- Nevada must figure out how to transition schools with a weak or non-existent performance framework to a new, outcomes-focused framework as part of the charter contract.
- Nevada is implementing several other systemwide reforms that apply to all public schools in the state— both traditional and charter— designed to improve student achievement, including a new funding formula.

1. <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/NV>

2. According to the Nevada Department of Education, star ratings are generally referred to as school “classifications.” Generally, a five-star school is considered above the 89th percentile, a four-star rating represents schools in the 75th to 89th percentile range, a three-star rating represents schools within the 25th to 74th percentiles and two-star schools fall between the 5th and 24th percentiles. One-star schools are in the lowest 5% of the state.

3. State Public Charter School Authority, 2016-2017 Agency Overview.