

the fund  FOR AUTHORIZING
EXCELLENCE
Investments to Strengthen Authorizers

THREE-YEAR REPORT
2009-2012



The Fund for Authorizing Excellence: Investments to Strengthen Authorizers
THREE-YEAR REPORT 2009-2012

Table of Contents

Message from Greg Richmond and Phoebe Harlan Anderson	1
Grants at a Glance.....	2
Genesis of The Fund	3
How The Fund Worked	4
Profile 1: Nevada Public Charter School Authority	6
Profile 2: Delaware Department of Education	8
Profile 3: The State University of New York (SUNY) Charter School Institute.....	10
Profile 4: Indianapolis Mayor's Office	12
The Fund's Impact	14
Grant Results: Rubric of Success.....	16
Lessons Learned from The Fund Grantees.....	17
Moving Ahead, With Knowledge.....	18
The Fund at a Glance.....	20

Dear Colleagues:

It's hard to imagine today's public education sector *without* charter schools and their authorizers. Compared to many other educational reforms, they're actually a relatively recent development—only 20 years old. With this youth, of course, comes constant growth and change.

At the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, we are dedicated to expanding educational opportunities for children by improving authorizing. ***The Fund for Authorizing Excellence*** was one of NACSA's responses to authorizer needs as we understood them back in 2009. Then, as now, some needs were constant: the need for authorizers to improve their practices and the need to find additional resources (money, time, and expertise) to make this happen.

The Fund brought these resources to the table, successfully investing **more than \$2 million** to strengthen dozens of authorizers. It offered authorizers, through a competitive process, the opportunity to examine their own practices and tackle areas of need. This has been a successful endeavor, and helped us engage many authorizers in hands-on work toward being an even more professional, creative, and effective charter school authorizing sector.

While the latest round of grantees completes their work, NACSA shares with you this **interim report**—a reflective, qualitative look at these three years of The Fund. As additional data is collected, we can share more quantitative findings. We'll know how many authorizers implemented improvements to their application processes, contracts, oversight systems, or renewal criteria and process, and how those improvements have begun to impact the performance of the schools in their portfolios. To us, the ultimate "So what?" of the changes authorizers are making today is the quality of the schools they authorize tomorrow. We know stronger application processes mean better decisions on which schools open. We know that more-rigorous performance frameworks provide meaningful information for schools to improve and renewals to be made. We believe these quality authorizing practices will mean higher-quality schools.

For now, we focus on the change afoot. Take 10 minutes to look through this report. You'll see how we structured The Fund, what grantees have accomplished to date, some lessons learned, and four stories of individual successes in authorizing shops in Delaware, Indianapolis, Nevada, and New York.

One standout in these profiles is the importance of the individuals leading the work. So, as we look hard at what our maturing authorizing sector needs next, one thing is clear: future NACSA initiatives will focus heavily on human capital development. While we know that money matters, we believe that people matter most.

We are dedicated to being there to serve the changing needs of our nation's authorizers as they set the pace for what it means to create and manage quality public schools.

Sincerely,



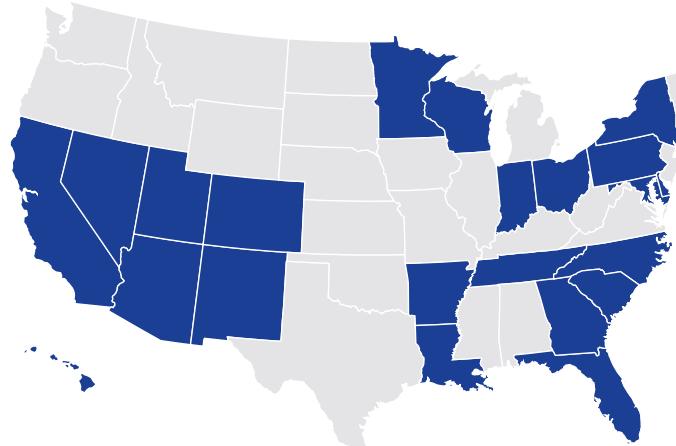
Greg Richmond
President and Chief Executive Officer



Phoebe Harlan Anderson
Director, The Fund for Authorizing Excellence

Grants at a Glance

Fund recipients collectively authorize more than **1,800** schools that enroll more than **600,000** students.



22 states

- » Arizona » Minnesota
- » Arkansas » Nevada
- » California » New Mexico
- » Colorado » New York
- » Delaware » North Carolina
- » Florida » Ohio
- » Georgia » Pennsylvania
- » Hawaii » South Carolina
- » Indiana » Tennessee
- » Louisiana » Utah
- » Maryland » Wisconsin

39 grants totaling **\$2,369,984**

15 EVALUATION GRANTS

8 PLANNING GRANTS

16 IMPLEMENTATION GRANTS

Genesis of The Fund



“People get excited about supporting individual schools, but it’s very hard to find resources for authorizing.”

The most effective authorizers approach their work strategically and proactively to expand educational opportunities for children. But it takes more than dollars to be strategic and proactive. Authorizers need other resources, such as staff, time, and deep expertise to truly take their work to the next level.

Knowing this reality, NACSA created **The Fund for Authorizing Excellence** in 2009. This grant-making program represented NACSA’s commitment to supporting authorizers in a way that would not just improve their practice, but also advance the overall charter school environment. For the last three years, NACSA has provided essential financial support, as well as hands-on consultation or access to other expertise to select authorizers who sought to improve their practice.

The Fund awarded three types of grants to authorizers and partnering organizations: *Evaluation*, *Planning*, and *Implementation*. All grant activities had to clearly and directly support the improvement or expansion of educational opportunities for students and align with NACSA’s *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*. Each grant required local buy-in and investment. Grants were awarded three times per year through a competitive process.

Over the past three years, The Fund awarded 39 grants totaling \$2,369,984 to 30 recipients in 22 states. These recipients collectively authorize more than 1,800 schools that enroll more than 600,000 students.

As this report was being published, many grantees were still completing work on their improvement initiatives. This interim report describes the three years of this project: how The Fund worked, its impact to date, an analysis of lessons learned, and some vivid portraits of a handful of authorizers who accepted this challenge to improve their practice.

How The Fund Worked

NACSA wanted The Fund's investments to advance high-quality charter school environments that lead to high student achievement. For this reason, NACSA chose grant recipients that aligned strongly with The Fund's *Guiding Principles*:

1. Authorizer leadership must have a **vision for quality** that is rigorous, consistent, and inspires key stakeholders to mobilize around its realization. The policies are clear, processes are transparent, and both support the creation and maintenance of a new public market space for autonomous, accountable public schools of choice.
2. Authorizer leadership must demonstrate a **commitment to improvement** and be adamant about its decisions to create high-quality educational opportunities by developing a rigorous application process and monitoring protocol, closing low-performing schools, and advocating for necessary resources—all while building a coalition of external and internal stakeholders.
3. Longevity is essential to advancing high-quality charter environments. **Potential for sustainability** is demonstrated by collaborating with internal and external stakeholders, leveraging resources, and developing relationships with the philanthropic community to support the vision.

NACSA created a three-tiered grant structure with the aim of creating what staff called a *pipeline for improvement*, starting with evaluation or planning and leading to implementation. Successful applicants first would dig into a rigorous evaluation of their current practices, or create strategic or operational plans if they already had clarity on priority needs. Then, if successful, these authorizers could apply for an implementation grant to dive into the actual work of changing current practice or initiating new systems.

Evaluation grants

These grants helped authorizers create a roadmap for needed improvements. During an intensive two months, NACSA staff guided authorizers through a rigorous document review, site visit, and stakeholder interviews on their policies and practices. They received a written report benchmarking their office against the nationally recognized *Principles & Standards*. The process culminated in a presentation on the evaluation findings to authorizer boards. These evaluation grants of up to \$37,500 included in-kind services by NACSA. Authorizers also received a small amount of direct grant funding to cover small expenses needed to get the evaluation done.

Planning grants

These grants helped authorizers be proactive by creating a long-term vision and plan for their work. Here, recipients had the option of using NACSA staff or hiring other planning consultants. Grants up to \$50,000 paid for that expertise to lead discussions on the authorizer's mission, vision, and work plans to operationalize both, engaging stakeholders along the way.

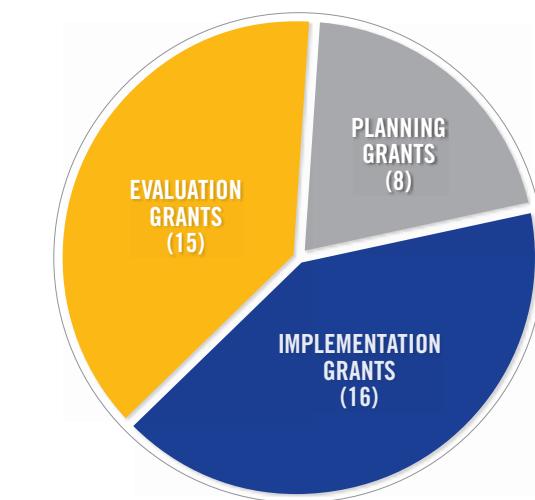
Implementation grants

Those authorizers that could point to a successful evaluation and/or planning process through The Fund—or authorizers that had previously engaged in an evaluation or strategic planning process—could then apply for an implementation grant to tackle one or more priorities for strengthening authorizer practice. Grants up to \$125,000 paid for the outside expertise (NACSA or other) to accomplish such tasks as revising current application processes, creating performance frameworks, or improving replication policies.

The Fund's Investments by Amount



The Fund's Investments by Grant Type



Grantees

The Fund's grantmaking was competitive, with more than 75 applications received. All submissions were evaluated against selection criteria including the quality of the project plan, its potential results and overall alignment with NACSA's *Principles & Standards* and The Fund's *Guiding Principles*. After staff reviews, an Investment Committee consisting of external experts in philanthropy, education reform, and charter school authorizing made final funding decisions.

Thirty-nine (39) grants were awarded, for an approval rate of just over 50 percent. Of those 39 grants, 15 funded evaluation projects, eight (8) funded planning, and 16 funded implementation projects. Year one of The Fund offered two funding cycles, while years two and three offered three cycles for greater flexibility.

The 39 grants were awarded to 30 recipients in 22 states. The awardees represent the full range of authorizers. They are diverse in terms of geography, size (from fewer than 10 schools to more than 500 schools in their portfolios), and type¹. In addition, two of the grantees—the Colorado League of Charter Schools and the Minnesota Department of Education—are not authorizers but instead organizations that seek to improve authorizing across multiple jurisdictions.

¹ Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); Independent Chartering Boards (ICBs)—mission-specific boards created or authorized by their state for the purpose of granting and overseeing charters; Non-Educational Government entities (NEG)—formerly categorized as Mayors/Municipalities (MUNs); Not-For-Profit organizations (NFPs); Local school districts, or Regional Education Agencies (LEAs); State Education Agencies (SEAs)—these can include commissioners, state boards of education, or offices within SEAs that report to commissioners or state boards of education.



Profile 1 Nevada Public Charter School Authority



Of course, we still expect our schools to meet process deadlines and follow other protocols. But now when we work with schools our actions clearly show that academic achievement matters above all else."

Steve Canavero, Director, Nevada Public Charter School Authority

Tectonic shift in the desert: Capital and capacity come to Nevada



STEVE CANAVERO

Steve Canavero, director of the Nevada Public Charter School Authority, describes shifting into this work after serving as a school principal. “I knew about running schools, not authorizing schools. Then I learned about NACSA, its *Principles & Standards*, and thought, this is *it*. If we want to do this work right, here’s what we need to do.”

Steve now runs the Authority, originally known as the Office of Charter Schools at the Nevada Department of Education, an independent office and biggest authorizer in the state, with 14 schools. When Steve accepted the position, he learned of the opportunity to apply for an **evaluation grant** through The Fund, and knew this could get his office on the right track.

Steve worked with William Haft, NACSA’s vice president of authorizer development, on a collaborative process to evaluate the state’s authorizing. “People from all over the state had authentic opportunities to be involved,” Steve describes, “and their involvement added to the validity of the findings.”

The evaluation was thorough, reports Steve, providing both a direction and details for immediate improvements. But *sharing* the evaluation was the most powerful, he says. “I shared the results widely, with everyone. It was a public document, presented to the state board, completely transparent. Having an external evaluation by a nationally-recognized panel provided the support and the defense for the changes that needed to happen.”

The Authority then applied for a second grant from NACSA’s Fund: an **implementation grant** to improve its charter school application process and create an aligned system to support performance-based accountability. Both projects had surfaced as priorities during the evaluation.

“The evaluation confirmed what we knew about our application process: it was more about technical compliance than merit,” Steve describes. “Like all authorizers, we had our culture, our process, our paperwork. Working with NACSA, we began to shift, ask different questions, explore capacity. For example, we used to look at resumes to see if they matched legal certification requirements. Now, we go well beyond that to see if leaders meet the demands of their positions and if they show evidence of past successes.”

But what was the real game changer, according to Steve? Adding an interview to the application process. “Having these interviews was truly powerful,” says Steve. He poses the analogy of the charter school applicant interview and a job interview: both are an indispensable opportunity to interact with the people with whom you are considering to work, and with whom you would need to have a long-term relationship.

The implementation grant helped Steve’s shop add a crucial element to the application process: a national evaluator. This individual reviewed applications, refined questions, and participated in interviews. Steve makes a compelling argument why this should be in the Authority’s budget going forward. “It was just

invaluable to have a national perspective at the table. This person has served on review committees in multiple locations and knows what experienced charter school operators look like.”

The Fund also provided expertise and dollars that allowed the Authority to delve into performance frameworks. To Steve, it was a logical next step. “We’ve improved the way we review and approve applications. This signals a culture shift: if we are approving only high-quality schools, why should we micro-manage their work?”

The Authority wanted to develop a framework to collect more meaningful information, again, shifting away from mere compliance. “When we looked hard at what we monitor,” Steve recalls, “98 percent of all items reside in the ‘organizational’ performance framework—the universe of compliance, steps, and processes. Now we’ve learned a great deal about performance frameworks that get at the two other aspects of accountability: academic and financial outcomes.”

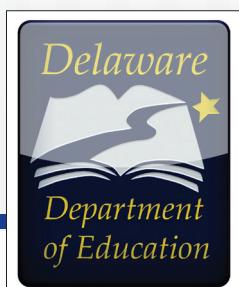
NACSA provided templates of these comprehensive frameworks and the connection with those who were part of developing them. “This is really a tectonic shift for us, like a fish that begins breathing out of water,” Steve emphasizes. “Of course, we still expect our schools to meet process deadlines and follow other protocols. But now when we work with schools our actions clearly show that academic achievement matters above all else.”

Steve’s office is working now with schools and the state board to explore these potential frameworks and decide together the best way to begin using them. All this leads to the next layer. “Now we’re struggling with how these frameworks will fit in,” he says. “When we find a school that’s not doing well, what do we do? This is an opportunity to discuss what’s in the agreement between us and schools, and to anchor these performance frameworks into the contract.”

This may lead to legislative changes to strengthen the charter school law. Steve stressed the importance of this: “Authorizers have to be proactive and keep working with folks at state levels to improve laws. Some authorizers, even with strong laws, may still approve weak applicants. But authorizers with strong laws can also make the most courageous decisions, approve only quality schools, and revoke charters if a school doesn’t do right by students,” he says.

Steve describes some of the biggest benefits of these grants: the practical issues of time and speed. “We would have accomplished some of this on our own, but never on this timeline. We would still be building the argument on *why* these are good ideas, instead of being able to move ahead with the voice of the experts,” he says.

“Now, others in Nevada look to us for a roadmap on quality authorizing in the state.”



Profile 2 Delaware Department of Education

Enlightening evaluation + intrepid implementation = improved authorizing



JOHN CARWELL

This profile of another successful grant by The Fund also begins with an evaluation—clearly a key ingredient in the recipe for authorizer excellence.

The Delaware Department of Education (DOE) received an **evaluation grant** from The Fund in early 2011. John Carwell, director of DOE's Charter School Office, states the impact, plain and simple: "That evaluation was the centerpiece for all our improvement work since then," he says. "It led to a stronger application process, new performance frameworks, and increased staffing for our office."

But back to the beginning. Delaware's charter school office was established based on the state's 1995 charter law. When John came on board, his aim was to see where the office stood in relation to model practices of other authorizers on the forefront of this work. "We knew we had work to do," he recounts, "we just didn't know what should come first."

He describes the evaluation as enlightening. "NACSA is really the knowledge-keeper in this regard. When we looked at our work through the lens of NACSA's *Principles & Standards*, we could see just where we fell short. Katie Piehl (NACSA staff) and Jim Ford (NACSA consultant) helped us look at what to prioritize. They not only asked questions and gathered information, but they also shared what other authorizers were doing. It was as much an evaluation as professional development."

Two areas that demanded immediate attention: the application process and performance frameworks. The Department was then awarded an **implementation grant** from The Fund to proceed with that work.

Today, the Department has a new application process, launched in September 2012 and designed to be fair and defensible. There are now separate applications for new and renewing charter schools.

The second set of DOE's work under the grant—building new performance frameworks—has been approved and now is being implemented. "Our previous frameworks focused on whether schools 'Meet' or 'Exceed' state averages. It didn't include multiple measures and lacked growth measures," John describes. Now, these new frameworks look at academic performance in a smarter way, but also provide sound organizational and financial measurement tools.

"We were also interested in performance frameworks that drive renewals and closures in a more rigorous way," John explains. "Previously, we had 14 renewal criteria, but they weren't really detailed enough to give feedback



No school should be surprised going into a high-stakes renewal process. Performance frameworks should set objective measures that are used in an annual performance review so that, well ahead of a renewal decision, a school knows where it stands and has a chance to correct its course."

John Carwell, Director, Charter Schools Office, Delaware Department of Education

and drive monitoring. We're exploring how to improve our renewal application for the next cycle in 2013."

One compelling aspect of Delaware's story of improvement is the stakeholder involvement. "When I came on board," John recalls, "the state board was eager to upgrade authorizing practices. In spring 2011, shortly after sharing NACSA's evaluation report, we gathered the first meeting of the *Charter Stakeholder Group*. Then we were invited by NACSA to apply for an implementation grant to get to work on our application and performance frameworks. It felt like the stars aligned."

DOE had evaluation results pointing to priorities, a grant from The Fund to address them, and stakeholders invested in making it happen. These individuals (from the state board, governor's office, teacher's union, funders, schools, and nonprofits) continue to meet and advise on progress. More recently, this close connection with others in state government has helped dovetail the new charter schools performance frameworks with the growth measures to be used by the state for all public schools.

A priority has been placed on inclusiveness as these frameworks have been developed. In fall 2011, John's office held a public meeting with charter leaders and legislators to share the direction they were going, invite input, and avoid surprises. As a follow-up, it hosted webinars in spring 2012 on each of the frameworks (academic, organizational, and financial). It then hosted a large face-to-face meeting with charter directors.

"In the past, we didn't do a systematic job of following up with the schools. This time we're doing it differently," John emphasizes. "No school should be surprised going into a high-stakes renewal process. Performance frameworks should set objective measures that are used in an annual performance review so that, well ahead of a renewal decision, a school knows where it stands and has a chance to correct its course."

So, what's the reaction from schools to date? "Schools say this is more fair and makes more sense. They also say it's a lot of new information and that there's still work to be done to, for example, collapse certain measures together," states John.

There certainly is work ahead, and now, new staff to help. John recently hired someone to drive the implementation of the new performance frameworks, taking his office from 2.5 to 3.5 staff. "That's another benefit of working with NACSA: it helped us understand, based on the 19 schools we authorize, how understaffed we were, and teased out the justification for more people-power."



Profile 3

The State University of New York (SUNY) Charter School Institute



We all have the same goals: more high-quality seats for kids."

Susie Miller Barker, Executive Director, SUNY Charter School Institute

An authorizer tradition continues: Making each other smarter



SUSIE MILLER BARKER

Executive Director of the SUNY Charter School Institute Susie Miller Barker recalls the days when authorizing was a brand new activity. “A small handful of us—Greg Richmond in Chicago, Jim Goenner in Michigan, Bob Bellafiore at SUNY, me in Massachusetts—we were all about sharing new tools as we developed them and the lessons we learned as we used those tools.”

SUNY used its **planning grant** from The Fund to continue this early tradition of gathering expertise and sharing lessons—this time on replication policies and practices.

An authorizer of considerable size and experience (19 staff, 111 schools), SUNY saw the need to refine the way its charter school sector continues to grow. In 2010, the New York law changed to allow multiple schools on one charter. If a high-performing school wanted to replicate, SUNY asked, what implications were there for the foundational authorizing work—due diligence on new applications, evaluation of replicating school performance, ability for organizations to grow? If one great school existed, what could SUNY streamline, and how much streamlining hit the sweet spot of high-quality authorizing with reduced paperwork?

In July 2011, with support from The Fund, SUNY began its planning work by sponsoring a two-day conference to focus discussion on these questions. Thinkers and practitioners from across the country gathered to explore replication policies and practices. In her opening remarks that day, Susie posited that the conference was an aim to “make us smarter.” The idea was to gather best practices on replication documents and protocols in the areas of application, contract, academic, financial and compliance monitoring, and renewal.

“The big question posed was: how do you grow charter schools and minimize risk? We keyed up questions on how to do this work and how to do it well,” Susie describes. “We gathered input on these troublesome questions from all sides.”

The Fund grant provided the resources to gather these experts. It also enabled SUNY to work with Public Impact, a firm with experience informing charter school policy and strengthening authorizing practices.

“This grant helped us hire expertise beyond SUNY’s in-house knowledge,” Susie recounts. “Authorizing shops, even one as big as SUNY, don’t have the resources or staff to do environmental scans of best practices or to plan intensive conferences.”

The conference, with 75 attendees, had several valuable outcomes. “First, it got us aligned in the use and meaning of our language around replication,” states Susie. “If we have time to talk and listen to each other, we can arrive at a common idea of what we mean when we say certain things. The conference also helped our board increase its understanding of replication policies. Finally, since the ideas were gathered from external experts, they held additional credibility, which will ease our next steps: creating practices that reflect our new policies.”

The conference underlined the fact that good replication practices are really about economies of scale for both schools and their authorizers, about removing burdens for both. As SUNY does this work, it is aided by an **implementation grant** from NACSA’s Fund, granted to design, pilot, evaluate, and disseminate authorizing practices and documents for replication.

“This NACSA grant has already significantly helped us understand how to do due diligence. I think of authorizers as ‘venture bureaucrats.’ We have the rarest forms of capital: 1) the charter itself, 2) access to public funds, and 3) children’s lives. We’ve been pretty good bureaucrats, and we took some risks early on,” Susie reflects. “But now it’s time to understand in much greater detail what risk is, how to do this due diligence on growth proposals, and how to protect against bad action associated with that change.”

SUNY is also committed to sharing these learnings, policies, and practices with the state and city departments of education. “This continues that early authorizing tradition, and it is part of being a better bureaucrat,” Susie emphasizes. “We all have the same goals: more high-quality seats for kids.”



Profile 4 Indianapolis Mayor's Office



We knew we had to bring performance reporting into the 21st century."

Beth Bray, former Director of Charter Schools, Indianapolis Mayor's Office

Access to thought leadership: Indianapolis notches up its authorizing



BETH BRAY

The work of quality authorizing is never done. One Midwest authorizer that has embraced this ethos of constant improvement is the Indianapolis Mayor's Office.

Seizing the opportunity to improve its already strong authorizing framework, the Mayor's Office applied for an **implementation grant** from The Fund in 2009. It proposed to tackle three areas: high school accountability, special education accountability, and Web-based accountability information.

Beth Bray, former director of charter schools in the Mayor's Office, describes how her group landed on these priorities. "Our previous accountability model didn't do a good enough job of assessing high schools or special education programs in a holistic way," she says. "We knew we could do better. We also knew we had to bring performance reporting into the 21st century. These areas were pressing and achievable."

The Mayor's Office capitalized on a flexible feature of The Fund: the option to use either NACSA staff or other external consultants. Beth explains the decision to engage external consultants. "We tapped into both local and national sources for thought leadership on these issues—people whom we'd worked with before and local leadership who were a good fit for the projects."

Working with a local tech firm, the Mayor's Office moved accountability data online, giving the public immediate access to performance data on the 22 schools in the city's portfolio. "It's been tremendously successful," Beth enthuses. "We're able to publish information in a timely, user-friendly way, for use by schools, parents, community, and the media."

The Mayor's Office tapped another local resource to delve into special education accountability. "Working with Azure Smiley-Angelov, Ph.D. at the University of Indianapolis, we asked, 'What would we want to know to decide if a school has a quality special education program?' She advised us what to require within charter applications, how to improve site visits, how to infuse special education in all areas of oversight, new language for assessments, and a new performance framework," Beth describes.

This new framework was then piloted in five schools. "It was enlightening; some schools that looked fine under the old system actually needed to improve. Parents may receive adequate notice of case conferences, testing is up to date, policies are in place—but all of that doesn't necessarily assess the

quality of the program for students. In contrast, now we look at the IEPs (Individualized Education Program) themselves," explains Beth. "We examine the goals: are they appropriate, rigorous, and evolving over time? Are staff tracking student progress over time? How much influence do parents have? Answering these questions means we need to do more classroom observations and deeper analyses of files, but it's much more meaningful."

The third piece of work under this grant—creating a new performance framework for high schools—is still in progress and has run into some speed bumps. A key measure for high school academic performance is college/career readiness, and the Office has found problems with data accessibility and ease of use. Across its high schools, some are tracking this data and some are not. For those schools that are tracking, there are varying degrees of thoroughness and quality. National Student Clearinghouse's Student Tracker uses Social Security numbers but has spotty national coverage; then, individual colleges may not collect Social Security numbers for their students. For students going into the workforce, they ran into confidentiality concerns on wage information.

"We don't have long-term, reliable sources of data yet to build benchmarks to fairly create a performance framework," concludes Beth. "We're still trying to gather another year or two of solid data on graduates."

The State of Indiana is also looking at how to best measure high school performance. The Mayor's Office is interested in aligning systems as they develop further and places a high value on stakeholder inclusion in its work. That collaborative attitude is reflected in requests from other authorizers in Indiana and beyond. "We regularly get calls," states Beth, "asking for such things as our findings to date on performance frameworks or to make presentations on the special education system."

How did The Fund make a difference? "We're a lean authorizing shop and always have been, funded by limited city resources," Beth says. "We couldn't have accessed these thought leaders without The Fund's resources, and we couldn't have done the work as quickly by ourselves. We would still be in the R&D phase on all components if we had proceeded without NACSA as our partner."

This points to the need for additional resources, via NACSA and others, for this work. "People get excited about supporting individual schools," Beth reinforces, "but it's very hard to find resources for authorizing."

The Fund's Impact

The rubric on page 16 describes how NACSA categorized the degree of success for each grantee. This was an internal tool developed by The Fund to reflect both NACSA's *Principles & Standards* as well as the proposal guidelines received by every applicant. Although more than a third of grantees are still completing projects supported by The Fund as this report is published, NACSA can point to the definitive or probable success of grantees as follows.

EVALUATION PROJECTS: 15 projects funded and completed

» **High Success:** Nearly one-half, or seven (7), of these authorizers were highly successful in their evaluation efforts. Evaluation reports were delivered to key stakeholders (including board members, staff, school leaders, policymakers, community leaders, or others) who positively embraced the recommendations. This provided critical buy-in and support to allow the grantee to move forward in making positive changes. The grantees also articulated specific changes they planned to make as a result of the evaluation and, at the time the evaluation was completed, could already point to changes being made.

See profiles on the [Nevada Public Charter School Authority \(page 6\)](#) and the [Delaware Department of Education \(page 8\)](#) for details on two highly successful evaluation projects.

- » **Success:** A handful, or five (5), of authorizers' projects were deemed successful. Their evaluation reports were delivered to key stakeholders. The grantees could articulate evaluation recommendations and shared strategies for how they planned to implement the evaluation recommendations.
- » **Low Success:** A few, or three (3), of authorizers' projects showed low success. The evaluation reports were not formally presented to key stakeholders, which diminished the opportunity for stakeholder support and engagement. The grantees could summarize the evaluation recommendations but did not indicate that any work had begun to implement recommendations and did not provide an indication of when that would happen in the future.

PLANNING PROJECTS: Eight (8) projects funded and completed

» **High Success:** Two-thirds, or six (6), of the grantees were highly successful in their planning efforts. The grantee developed and approved a strategic plan that incorporated all of the following essential elements: SWOT analysis, clearly defined mission and vision, core strategies to achieve the mission and vision, and an operational plan that prioritized the plan's goals. Stakeholders (including board members, staff, school leaders, policymakers, community leaders, or others) were engaged in the grants to ensure sustainability. Finally, the plans upheld NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

See profile on the [SUNY Charter School Institute \(page 10\)](#) for details on this highly successful planning project.

- » **Success or Low Success:** The remaining authorizers, or two (2), had projects that were categorized as a 'Success' if a plan was developed that included some, but not all, of the essential elements of a strategic plan (SWOT analysis, clearly defined mission and vision, core strategies to achieve the mission and vision, and an operational plan that prioritized the plan's goals). They were deemed a 'Low Success' if the plan that was developed could not be defined as a true strategic plan because it did not contain the majority of necessary elements.

IMPLEMENTATION PROJECTS: 16 projects funded, four (4) completed to date

At publication time, the majority of implementation projects were still underway. These grants were generally awarded later in the life of The Fund, once some authorizers were in the pipeline; in addition, due to their complex nature, these projects take the most time.

NACSA's internal tool to measure their success will be as follows:

» **High Success:** An authorizer will be highly successful in its implementation project if the grantee achieves all agreed-upon grant goals or makes course corrections in light of challenges. It is hard to predict the future when writing a grant proposal, and often authorizers have to revisit original project plans and alter them in light of other circumstances. 'High Success' authorizers also will engage stakeholders in the grant projects to ensure sustainability. Finally, the work will uphold NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.

See profile on the [Indianapolis Mayor's Office \(page 12\)](#) for details on this highly successful implementation project.

- » **Success:** Authorizers will be deemed successful if they achieve some grant goals but do not offer course corrections in the face of challenges.
- » **Low Success:** An authorizer's project will be categorized as 'Low Success' if the grantee does not achieve project goals.

Grant Results: Rubric of Success

	High Success	Success	Low Success
Evaluation Consider stakeholder engagement and interest in the evaluation recommendations, and the authorizer's ability to translate recommendations into practice.	Evaluation report was delivered to the decision-making board, who positively embraced the recommendations Grantee can articulate specific changes that will be made and indicates that these changes already have begun	Evaluation report was delivered to the decision-making board Grantee articulates evaluations recommendations and offers changes that the office plans to make as a result	The evaluation report was not formally presented to the decision-making board Grantee can regurgitate evaluation recommendations but does not indicate that any work has begun to implement recommendations and does not provide an indication of when that will happen in the future
Planning Consider stakeholder engagement and buy-in of the process and finalized plan, if the plan has the classic tenets of a strategic plan, and if it puts the authorizer on a trajectory to improve and embrace quality authorizing practices.	A plan was developed that incorporates the following: strength/weakness/opportunity/threat (SWOT) analysis, inclusion of key stakeholders (including board members, staff, school leaders, policymakers, community leaders, or others), clearly defined mission/vision, core strategies to achieve the mission/vision, and an operational plan that prioritizes the plan's goals Stakeholders were engaged in the grant to ensure sustainability Upholds NACSA's <i>Principles & Standards</i>	A plan was developed that includes at least three of the following: SWOT analysis; inclusion of key stakeholders; clearly defined mission/vision; core strategies to achieve the mission/vision; and an operational plan that prioritizes the plan's goals	A plan was developed that includes fewer than three of the following: SWOT analysis; inclusion of key stakeholders; clearly defined mission/vision; core strategies to achieve the mission/vision; and an operational plan that prioritizes the plan's goals
Implementation Consider the grantee's success in carrying out the stated objectives and deliverables, whether these actions and products uphold NACSA <i>Principles & Standards</i> , and if stakeholders were engaged in the project to ensure its sustainability.	Achieved all grant goals or made course corrections in light of challenges Stakeholders were engaged in the grant to ensure sustainability Upholds NACSA's <i>Principles & Standards</i>	Achieved some grant goals but did not offer course corrections in the face of challenges	Did not achieve project goals

Five Lessons Learned from The Fund Grantees

- 1 Evaluation may be the most important first step toward improvement.**
The most striking authorizer improvements began with an honest look at the state of things. NACSA found that evaluation was the most effective way to engage authorizers on concrete levels, to promote specific improvement, and to engage stakeholder support for critical changes. Evaluations are, by their nature, authorizer-focused. This contrasts with strategic planning processes, which can be complicated by the relationship between the authorizer and the larger bureaucratic entity it sits within. Strong, specific evaluations can also function similarly to a strategic plan, with short- and long-term recommended actions.
- 2 Leadership matters.**
NACSA experienced the profound difference made by the person at the helm. Other individuals (from staff to consultants to boards) certainly play inextricably vital roles in change management. But a project's outcome often rested squarely on the capacity of the authorizer leader to focus energy and resources, to creatively problem solve, and to alter course when strategically necessary.
- 3 A neutral third-party voice can be critical.**
When it came to presenting plans for improvement to boards and other public stakeholder bodies, many grantees stressed the importance of NACSA as an external, nationally-respected source to back up the authorizer's plan. Stakeholders (such as board members, staff, school leaders, policymakers, community leaders, and others) understood that recommendations were based on industry-recognized standards of practice as defined in NACSA's *Principles & Standards*. This not only boosted credibility, but according to authorizers, it also increased the likelihood for change.
- 4 Timing matters, too.**
A good time for evaluation and planning for improvements is when there is a transition. NACSA found that new leadership is more likely to be open to critique and ready to act upon it. With a clean slate and no previous baggage to weigh down new leadership, risk-taking and bold moves become easier. This momentum fosters greater probability of improvement.
- 5 The need for more resources has never been greater.**
Authorizers said various versions of the same thing: this job requires a great deal of work. If making and sustaining authorizing improvements requires heroic hours and energy, authorizers question how to sustain the pace. It certainly takes creative use of limited time and limited resources. It also takes additional resources that have yet to be tapped.

Moving Ahead, With Knowledge

NACSA is using its knowledge of authorizers, reinforced and deepened during three years of experience with The Fund, in the forefront of planning efforts. Moving forward with this and other programs, these key pieces of knowledge serve as guideposts:

NACSA KNOWS IMPROVING AUTHORIZING IS COMPLEX.

The complex, discreet tasks of an authorizer are inextricably linked and part of one continuous process in relationship with charter schools. The Fund—as most grant-making initiatives must—focused at times on one or more tasks, isolated from other tasks. For example, NACSA knows that the development of more-rigorous performance frameworks is one important task that cannot stand alone; it must be incorporated into the contracts with individual schools and into the authorizer's ongoing monitoring and decision making.

NACSA KNOWS SHARING KNOWLEDGE AND INSTITUTIONAL MEMORY MATTER.

When undergoing any change effort, the change agents are key. How they document and share information with co-workers and stakeholders—how they ensure institutional memory—is also crucial. Without strong institutional memory, understandable havoc can be wreaked on work plans due to staff departures, parental leaves, health issues, and the like. This makes it critical to share evaluation results with boards as well as to ensure stakeholder engagement on improvement plans. In addition, NACSA may explore how to encourage greater staff continuity to manage grant commitments, and to avoid gaps in knowledge or unnecessary slow-downs when these inevitable staffing changes occur.

NACSA KNOWS AUTHORIZERS NEED MULTIFACETED, CHANGING RESOURCES.

Authorizers are constantly pulled in competing directions. They face the tension between getting daily tasks done and taking time to think long term. Just because an authorizer successfully received a grant to conduct a strategic planning process does not mean that it then automatically connects to other resources (offered by NACSA or others) needed to implement that plan. In a world filled with distractions, NACSA wants to do more to proactively promote additional roads to improving practice.

NACSA KNOWS STRONG CHARTER LAWS MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Some authorizers stressed the need to look at laws and regulations that either stymie or support quality authorizing. Authorizers that work with the backing of strong laws can often make the most courageous decisions to support quality schools and shut down those that do not serve children. NACSA recognizes that this policy work continues to be a necessary agenda priority.

NACSA KNOWS PEOPLE MATTER MOST.

Good authorizing requires money and the backing of sound legislation. But ultimately, it cannot succeed (nor can any complex initiative) without the right leader and the right staff to get the work done. Key leadership characteristics common among leaders where grants were most successful included a strong vision for quality authorizing, an ability to influence and motivate others around that vision, and an entrepreneurial and problem-solving spirit. These are the same skills that NACSA seeks to develop and refine in its new leadership programs.

Reflecting on The Fund's successes over the last three years has positioned NACSA to better address authorizers' needs.



NACSA recently launched its **One Million Lives** campaign, a commitment to changing the lives of one million children by building a pipeline of experienced talent in authorizing, providing authorizers with practical resources and tools to foster high quality authorizing practice, and by advocating for policy that supports smart charter school growth and strong accountability.

The **Institute for Leadership in Charter School Authorizing** is one new NACSA initiative designed to strengthen not just authorizing *practices*, but the authorizing *profession*. The Institute provides both resources and education in best practices, advances the leadership and substantive skills of current authorizers, and cultivates future leaders.

LEADERS PROGRAM

The Institute has recently launched two programs. The **Leaders Program**, funded in part by the United States Department of Education, is a unique professional development opportunity for new leaders of authorizing offices.

FELLOWS PROGRAM

The **Fellows Program** identifies young professionals who provide human capital support to authorizers who share a commitment to NACSA's *Principles & Standards*. It will also create a pipeline of future high-quality leaders for the charter school authorizing sector.

NACSA is committed to keep grappling with this mix of nuanced factors: the complexity of the work, the onus of leadership, the shifting nature of authorizers' needs, and the impact of political environments. One cannot be addressed in isolation of the others. NACSA welcomes the energy and wisdom of authorizers, researchers, and other education leaders in facing these challenges to create more quality schools for all children.

The Fund at a Glance (as of Fall 2012)

Evaluation			
Grantee	Award Date	Grant Details	Schools Authorized
Arizona State Board for Charter Schools	Fall 2010	Arizona was awarded an evaluation grant to help determine what existing organizational structures and tools could be used to monitor Arizona's new Performance Management Plan.	515
Arkansas Department of Education	Spring 2010	Driven by its commitment to create high-quality educational opportunities, the Arkansas Department of Education received a comprehensive authorizer evaluation grant.	36
Ball State University	Fall 2010	A comprehensive evaluation allowed the Office of Charter Schools to review and streamline authorizing processes.	41
Baltimore City Public Schools	Summer 2011	Baltimore City Public Schools used the evaluation grant to analyze its current authorizing practices and benchmark them against national standards.	33
Delaware Department of Education	Fall 2010	Delaware was awarded an evaluation grant to help identify areas of focus in order to achieve the ambitious goals proposed in the Race to the Top application.	19
Hawaii Charter School Review Panel	Summer 2011	A comprehensive authorizer evaluation assessed the capacity, effectiveness, and sharing roles of the Charter School Review Panel, the Charter School Administrative Office, and the Board of Education.	31
Hillsborough County Public Schools	Fall 2011	An evaluation helped the charter school staff increase its efficiency and maintain high-quality authorizing in light of decreasing resources.	44
Louisiana Department of Education	Summer 2011	The Louisiana Department of Education used the evaluation recommendations to provide clarity around how the Department can grow its capacity by streamlining resources.	82
Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools	Winter 2011	A comprehensive evaluation enabled the Office of Charter and Private Schools to identify strategies in order to strengthen its practices and recruit the highest quality charter schools to the district.	14
Nevada Department of Education	Fall 2010	The Department used evaluation results to support its goal of moving from a passive to an assertive authorizer.	20
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction	Summer 2011	The evaluation grant provided a formative assessment of authorizing practices and policies to enhance the quality of the state's authorizing; this was timely since the state's charter cap had been lifted recently.	109
Philadelphia School District	Spring 2010	The evaluation grant supported Philadelphia's efforts to adopt authorizer policies that are aligned with best practices.	84
South Carolina Public Charter School District	Spring 2010	The comprehensive authorizer evaluation grant helped South Carolina align its practices with NACSA's <i>Principles & Standards</i> .	16
Stockton Unified School District	Fall 2010	Stockton used evaluation recommendations to develop authorizing protocol.	12
Utah State Charter School Board	Winter 2011	The Utah State Charter School Board used the evaluation recommendations to develop a roadmap for future practice and policy improvements.	88

Planning			
Grantee	Award Date	Grant Details	Schools Authorized
Colorado Charter School Institute	Winter 2011	Through the grant, the Colorado Charter School Institute developed a strategic plan to become a successful agent for quality education across Colorado.	22
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation / Education Service Center of Central Ohio	Spring 2010	These two organizations partnered to create a business plan for a new, statewide, high-quality authorizer.	19
Georgia Charter School Commission	Fall 2009	The Charter School Commission was a new authorizer and the grant enabled it to develop its first strategic plan.	n/a
Indiana Charter School Board	Fall 2011	The Indiana Charter School Board created a comprehensive strategic plan to establish a high bar for authorizing practices.	3
Milwaukee Common Council	Fall 2009	Milwaukee developed and finalized a strategic plan that changed its strategic direction from one that passively accepts new school applications to one that proactively seeks applicants.	9
Minnesota Department of Education	Fall 2010	With the state's increased focus on authorizer accountability, the Department developed a plan based on NACSA's <i>Principles & Standards</i> to improve the quality of authorizing and ultimately, the performance of charter schools throughout the state.	n/a
New York State Education Department	Fall 2010	New York developed a strategic plan that focused on charter authorizing and guided the Department's work as a statewide authorizer.	48
SUNY Charter Schools Institute	Summer 2011	With a planning grant from The Fund, SUNY developed high-quality, replication-specific policies and a plan for developing replication-specific documents and protocols in the areas of application; contract; academic, financial, and compliance monitoring; and renewal.	102

The Fund at a Glance (as of Fall 2012)

Implementation			
Grantee	Award Date	Grant Details	Schools Authorized
Arizona State Board for Charter Schools*	Fall 2011	Arizona State Board for Charter Schools is using the implementation grant to embed an interview into the application process and to create an evaluation framework.	515
Colorado Charter School Institute*	Fall 2011	With The Fund's support, Colorado Charter School Institute is improving its performance framework by creating robust measures and implementation procedures.	22
Colorado League of Charter Schools	Winter 2012	An implementation grant from NACSA is supporting the League's work to implement quality authorizing standards throughout the state.	n/a
Delaware Department of Education*	Summer 2011	With support from The Fund, Delaware is developing an objective and defensible application process and a performance framework to drive renewal and closure decisions.	19
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation/Education Service Center of Central Ohio*	Winter 2011 and Summer 2012	These two organizations received two implementation grants to initiate a new, large-scale authorizer in Ohio.	19
Friends of Education	Summer 2010	Friends of Education created a new public accountability system for Minnesota authorizers and charter schools to turn school performance data into actionable information.	17
Indiana Charter School Board*	Summer 2012	With support from The Fund, the Indiana Charter School Board will refine its accountability system and develop an innovation-focused request for proposals.	3
Indianapolis Mayor's Office	Fall 2009	Indianapolis received an implementation grant to develop a college- and career-readiness accountability framework, to pilot a new evaluation system for students in special education, and to create a Web-based version of annual accountability reports.	27
Los Angeles Unified School District	Summer 2010	Los Angeles used grant funds to support the development and implementation of clear expectations for school academic and financial performance.	232
Minneapolis Public Schools	Summer 2012	Minneapolis Public Schools implemented policies and practices aligned with NACSA's <i>Principles & Standards</i> in order to grow a significant portfolio of charter schools.	5
Minnesota Department of Education*	Summer 2012	Minnesota is developing and implementing a charter school accountability framework, an authorizer data system to operationalize charter school data at the authorizer level, and an authorizer monitoring and evaluation system to guide authorizer renewal decisions.	n/a
Nevada Public Charter School Authority*	Summer 2011	Nevada received an implementation grant to make substantive changes to the charter school application and to create a coherent and aligned system to support performance-based accountability.	20
New Mexico Public Education Department	Winter 2012	The New Mexico Public Education Department received an implementation grant to create and implement a performance framework and contract.	52
New York State Education Department*	Fall 2011	With implementation support from The Fund, the New York State Education Department is developing and deploying comprehensive and sustainable fiscal oversight tools for all charter schools authorized by the New York State Board of Regents.	48
SUNY Charter Schools Institute*	Fall 2011	In a seamless transition from its planning grant, SUNY is designing, piloting, evaluating, and disseminating authorizing practices and documents for replication.	102

*Implementation grantees that have previously received an evaluation or planning grant from The Fund

Funders

The Walton Family Foundation
Robertson Foundation
United States Department of Education

Investment Committee

Fawzia Ahmed, Walton Family Foundation
Paul Hill, Center on Reinventing Public Education
Becca Bracy Knight, The Broad Center
John Lock, Project Lead The Way
Joe Siedlecki, Michael & Susan Dell Foundation

The Fund staff

Phoebe Harlan Anderson

NACSA staff/consultants serving The Fund grantees

Achieve
Apparatus
Augenblick, Palaich and Associates, Inc.
Parker Baxter
Shari Berland
Andrew Broy
Melody Camp
CliftonLarsonAllen
Colorado League of Charter Schools
Jim Ford
William Haft
Beth Heaton
Becky Hill
Hillary Johnson
Rachel Ksenyak
Margaret Lin
Tamara Lumpkin
Paul O'Neill
LouAnn Bierlein Palmer
Katie Piehl
Porter Wright Morris & Arthur LLP
Public Impact
Rebound Solutions Consulting
Resource Network Inc.
Greg Richmond
Jennifer Rippner
SchoolWorks
Matt Shaw
Dr. Azure Smiley-Angelov
Nelson Smith
Jennifer Sneed
Whitney Spalding Spencer
Larry Stanton
Simeon Stolzberg
Justin Testerman
Young, Minney & Corr, LLP
Steve Zimmerman



National Association of Charter
School Authorizers

105 W. Adams Street, Suite 3500
Chicago, IL 60603-6253
Phone: 312.376.2300
Fax: 312.376.2400

www.qualitycharters.org