

SNAPSHOT: A LOOK AT DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD



“We have learned over many years, across many states and cities, that good authorizing is more likely to result in a strong charter school sector. NACSA has for years defined the basic building blocks of good authorizing. The QPP project takes that a step further, looking beyond basic practices to more foundational conditions, such as the beliefs, approaches, and organizational structures that characterize strong charter authorizers.”

—Scott Pearson, Executive Director, District of Columbia Public Charter School Board

What is this case study about?

This case study takes a close look at how and why the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board does its authorizing work, providing big-picture oversight to charter schools in Washington, D.C. It is one of five case studies at the heart of NACSA’s groundbreaking Quality Practice Project, which explores the authorizer practices associated with high-quality charter school portfolios.

Why Washington, D.C.?

The District of Columbia Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) is one of the top charter school authorizers in the country, based on an 11-point evaluation of school portfolio and authorizer performance outcomes. Some facts of note about DC PCSB:

- DC PCSB opened its first charter school in 1998 and is the sole charter school authorizer in the District of Columbia. By 2017-18, it had grown to be authorizer of 120 charter schools and 46% of public school students in the district were attending charter schools.
- DC PCSB holds its charter schools accountable for their performance, closing 23 schools over the past six years.
- DC PCSB actively encourages high-performing schools to grow. Those efforts appear to have had their intended impact: during the last four years, the DC PCSB approved the expansion of 31 high-performing schools.

Leadership, Commitment, Judgment at DC PCSB



Leadership: DC PCSB approves schools to open in neighborhoods that desperately need good schools, even in the face of pressure to not open new schools. They minimize personal preference in models and approaches by creating policies and frameworks that narrowly focus on student academic achievement expectations, equity of access and learning, and financial stability. The authorizer has pioneered robust transparency in school results, including the areas of discipline and finances, despite pushback from schools about potential damage to their image. They have been rigorous about closing low-performing schools, even in the face of political pressure not to.



Commitment: The DC Public Charter School Board has a single mission: to provide high-quality public charter schools to students and families. DC PCSB’s board is independent and committed to their job of quality authorizing, while maintaining a larger vision to serve as a national model for authorizing. The authorizer has exclusive control over the use of funds, and consistently invests in systems to improve authorizing. For example, they now have a data team to allow staff to better focus on school results and outcomes.



Judgment: When collecting key accountability data, DC PCSB has always allowed schools to correct erroneous data even if the deadline has passed. This ensures that high-stakes accountability is based on accurate information—more important to them than adhering to data submission deadlines. They engage in a holistic approach to reviewing new and expansion charter applications that uses a blended and balanced assessment of strengths and weaknesses of leadership, academic program, finance, and equity that a scoring rubric would not. Board and staff join together for a final evaluation called “defense day,” where all staff who have participated in the review gather to debate what the decision should be. They have built a strong procedural foundation while building flexibility into decisions, allowing leadership some discretion in decision making.

Who does this impact?

DC PCSB has closed 23 schools over the past six years and their results continue to significantly outpace district averages. Despite an oversight fee 1/3 that of many authorizers, they are amply funded. Having control over their resources allows them to be efficient and at the same time direct resources where needed. Their poorest neighborhoods have over a dozen high-quality “Tier 1” schools (a marker of quality in the DC community) and more students in Washington, D.C. attend these schools than ever before. DC Equity Reports are a national model in data transparency about school performance in multiple areas.

They are not afraid to take risks in approving great, yet unproven, ideas, and indeed have approved some excellent schools that might have failed a strict rubric. One example is Monument Academy, which serves foster students and is becoming a national model in this area.

Where can I learn more?

Charter school authorizers across the country can improve their own practices by asking new questions based on the findings throughout this case study and the corresponding report, “Leadership, Commitment, Judgment: Elements of Successful Charter Authorizing.” Read more, including the full report based on findings from all five case studies, at <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research/quality-practice-project/>.