

SNAPSHOT: A LOOK AT MASSACHUSETTS BOARD OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION



“The Quality Practice Project has been a great opportunity to work with others in the authorizing community, using an evidence-based lens to take stock of authorizing practices across the nation. Education leaders and stakeholders must be willing to think differently and creatively in order to stay relevant and effective. In Massachusetts, our authorizing practices—and judgment in how they are used—help us navigate the creative tension between accountability and autonomy.”

—Cliff Chuang, Senior Associate Commissioner for Educational Options, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

What is this case study about?

This case study takes a close look at how and why the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) does its authorizing work, providing big-picture oversight to charter schools in Massachusetts. 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 BESE?

The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) 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 BESE:

- By 2017-18, BESE authorized 82 charter schools serving almost 45,000 students (4.5% of state enrollment).
- BESE provides the public accurate and transparent information about the performance of its schools with annual performance reports available on its website.
- Massachusetts had more charter schools and students in “High” or “Very High” academic growth categories in NACSA's analysis, compared to schools and students in “Typical” growth categories in more than two academic years across both English/Language Arts and Math.

Leadership, Commitment, Judgment at BESE



Leadership: BESE leaders and staff are passionate about continuous improvement, knowledgeable and thoughtful about charter school development and accountability, and integral to all relevant decision making. They feel responsible for maintaining the state's strong reputation as the inventor of many charter oversight best practices. One example of their leadership in action: They recruit and approve applications from developers with the capacity to create high-quality schools intending to serve disadvantaged students. They do this through targeted recruitment of successful operators; supporting and training new developers; and ensuring developer capacity through a rigorous application process.



Commitment: Massachusetts demonstrates an institutional commitment to quality authorizing. As the state's sole authorizer, BESE has a mission to strengthen the Commonwealth's public education system so that every student is prepared to succeed. The Office of Charter Schools and School Redesign (OCSSR) reports to the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education. During BESE meetings devoted to charter issues, staff have direct interactions with BESE's appointed members, where they answer questions as the BESE debates the merits of granting, amending, or renewing a charter. History shows strong alignment between BESE's decisions and Commissioner recommendations.



Judgment: BESE's authorizing staff is long-tenured. They work closely together and have an unusually reflective practice, devoting time each year to reviewing and adjusting norms and judgment criteria. They also periodically test their ratings of schools against other outcomes to ensure that their judgments are holding up. The longevity of staff, promotion from within, and direct experience with charter schools have been huge assets. This has provided for important leadership stability, both within the OCSSR and with charter schools in the Commonwealth, and has allowed managers to have a deeper knowledge of the work of their direct reports because they themselves have also performed these tasks. According to one staff, “Nobody does work alone, and nobody is doing a job that one of us has not done.”

Who does this impact?

BESE has created an environment where charter schools are thriving. The authorizer employs clear, transparent, rigorous, and measurable criteria. Charter applicants and existing schools understand the criteria and acknowledge that BESE has established rigorous expectations. Without this comprehensive work to authorize charter schools through a transparent and cohesive system, it is likely that the quality of charter applications and schools would decline. BESE ensures fidelity to the vision of charter schools as a way to offer more quality education options to Massachusetts children.

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/>.