EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BEYOND THE FRINGE
CHARTER AUTHORIZING AS ENROLLMENT GROWS

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

REPORT AUTHORED BY:
DANIELA DOYLE, PUBLIC IMPACT
JULI KIM, PUBLIC IMPACT
M. KAREGA RAUSCH, PH.D., NACSA

PUBLIC IMPACT

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Monique Johnson starts her trek…just after 6 a.m. when she and son Shownn, 13, an eighth-grader, catch a ride to a bus stop eight blocks from their home in the city's Brightmoor neighborhood. There are closer stops, Johnson said, but they're pitch black at that hour—and dangerous. They wait for the bus in the glow of a nearby gas station, huddling together under blankets on frigid winter mornings. The No. 43 bus comes around 6:20 a.m.….The bus drops the pair at the corner of Woodward and Manchester in Highland Park. Mother and son typically wait 20 minutes for their next bus, the No. 53…

(They) typically arrive at University Prep Science & Math Middle School, a well-regarded charter school in the Michigan Science Center, around 7:30 a.m. and Johnson waits with her son until his classes begin at 7:50. She then makes her way back home—another No. 53, another No. 43—until reaching Brightmoor around 9:30 a.m. That's about three and a half hours before she has to leave again on another four buses to return to Shownn's school and bring him home. Total daily journey: 52 miles, 5-6 hours.

-Excerpt from Six hours, eight buses: The extreme sacrifice Detroit parents make to access better schools (Erin Einhorn, Chalkbeat.org, April 8, 2016)

Shownn and his mother Monique are passionate about getting a good education, and they go to extreme lengths to secure it. This scene is repeated by families across the country, as parents and students seek out quality public schools—better options, options they prefer over the status quo.

High-quality charter schools are providing life-changing opportunities for students, especially in urban locales, and meeting diverse needs in communities across the country. This is real progress that is leading the way to a better life for millions of children.

But charter growth also brings new challenges. Charters began on the fringe of the public school landscape. As charters grow and become increasingly mainstream, the way they work and interact with other public schools and communities must evolve.

The particular transportation challenge Shownn and his mother face is just one access issue that communities must solve, especially as charter schools serve a larger proportion of students. Improving access means growing the number of good schools (especially in neighborhoods of need), providing the information families need to identify schools that meet their needs, ensuring that all students have a fair opportunity to attend high-quality schools, and providing the infrastructure families need to attend the school of their choice.

This report—written primarily for charter school authorizers, especially those with a large or growing number of charters—explores the issues communities must address to ensure equitable student and family access to great public schools. It describes how authorizers in two communities with many charter schools—together with other change agents—are tackling challenges such as transportation, enrollment, equity, accountability, and communication—among the most pressing issues in a growing number of communities across the country (See Table 1).

TABLE 1. ACCESS ISSUES THAT ARISE AS CHARTER ENROLLMENT GROWS

ENROLLMENT ISSUES	RESOURCE ISSUES	STUDENT EQUITY ISSUES	ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUES	COMMUNICATION ISSUES
If schools have different *enrollment processes...*	If charters do not have access to free or low-cost *facilities...*	If charters cannot or do not serve a *proportional share of students in each grade or the highest needs students,* including students with disabilities, English learners, and students who transfer during the year...	If charter authorizers and districts have *different criteria for opening and closing schools...*	If charters become a *more visible* part of the education landscape...
• *Families* may struggle to navigate multiple systems. • *Districts and charters* may face uncertainty related to student counts and funding as students move on and off waiting lists at the start of the year.	• The supply of schools may not match the demand, leaving some *families* with many choices, while others have few. • *Districts* may face intense charter competition in some communities and serve the entire student population in others. • Fewer high-quality *charters* may open.	• Some *families* may have few or no options. • *Districts* must find a placement for those students. • *Charters* may face criticism for failing to serve all students.	• *Families* may have fewer quality school options because fewer higher-performing schools are replacing lower-performing schools. • Low-performing schools, including *district or charter*, may be able to continue operating for too long. • There may be fewer opportunities for excellent *charters* to open and grow.	• *Families* may want more opportunities to influence and engage with charters. • Disparities between charter and district practices may draw increasing attention and scrutiny to *charter* leaders.
If the same *information and metrics* are not available for all schools...	If charter schools do not have access to free or low-cost student *transportation...*	If some schools are more apt to *use exclusionary discipline policies, such as expulsions and out-of-school suspensions...*	If some schools are evaluated using *accountability systems* that are less rigorous than others...	If the district and charters do not have an avenue to *communicate with each other...*
• *Families* may struggle to compare schools and make educated choices for their children.	• *Families* must assume the burden of transporting their children to school, or they will have fewer feasible school choices. • *Charters* must re-direct other funds to transportation or be less accessible to some students.	• Some *students* may find themselves moving from multiple schools. • *Districts* must find a placement for those students (and some students may drop out). • *Charters* may face criticism for failing to serve all students.	• Those schools will appear to *families* and the public to be better than they truly are.	• They will struggle to address the issues in this table to the detriment of *families, districts, and charters.*

Good authorizers have always done things such as monitor student recruitment practices, ensure application systems are legal, and evaluate equity in the student enrollment process. Yet the public is increasingly looking to authorizers as systems leaders to help solve a broader range of access issues, particularly as charter schools become a larger part of the public education landscape in their communities.

This report provides a case study of two authorizers—Denver Public Schools and the DC Public Charter School Board—both with strong outcomes in many areas and a high or growing charter enrollment. For each, we summarize how their approach to authorizing has shaped the way they address the issues that arise as charter enrollment grows. We describe how that approach has helped them address specific access challenges. Then we identify issues on the horizon that will need attention.

Access issues are complicated, often localized, and difficult to solve in a way that makes all stakeholders happy. Thus, this report does not provide one "right" way of solving such issues, nor does it advocate for any particular solution. Instead, the report provides ideas, findings, and processes for authorizers and other leaders to consider when tackling such issues in their communities. These takeaways can guide others facing similar challenges:

- **Be a systems leader.** Access challenges impact schools and their students. That's why authorizers should play a key role in problem solving, even if doing so falls outside their traditional responsibilities. Authorizers can influence the context in which these issues play out by ensuring a quality sector—something that has benefited Washington, D.C. and Denver.
- **Get comfortable with trade-offs and compromises.** Tensions between competing priorities are part and parcel of nearly any solution to access challenges. Stakeholders in a given community may not always agree on the trade-offs or how to weigh them. But authorizers need to be aware of those trade-offs, as well the values they use to evaluate them.
- **Build strong relationships.** Positive relationships with other leaders, even those who may not support charters, are crucial to finding solutions to access challenges. Those relationships take time to build. Today, district and charter leaders in D.C. and Denver can easily pick up the phone and call one another, but that was not always the case.
- **Prioritize access to resources.** In nearly every city, charters lack access to critical resources such as facilities and transportation; this lack of access hinders their growth and financial sustainability and undercuts their efforts to serve all students. Student equity challenges almost always require cities to reallocate resources and organize for efficiencies within sectors.
- **Consider third parties as problem solvers.** It's no secret that building trust takes time, especially when there's a history of distrust. In both case studies, third parties played a key problem-solving role. Whether a philanthropic organization, community organization, nonprofit, or other important stakeholder, third parties can help build trust, apply pressure, and sometimes, actually take ownership for problem solving.
- **Get ahead.** Access issues are present from the day the city's first charter school opens. As enrollment grows, these issues become more acute. Problem solving should not wait. Education leaders, advocates, and funders should get ahead of these issues before they reach a breaking point, and there is no choice but to address them.