



Navigating the Authorization Process: A Toolkit for Leaders of Nontraditional Charter Schools

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Foreword

At the outset of this work, we hypothesized that charter school oversight structures made it difficult for charter schools with nontraditional models to open, operate, and flourish. We worried that the trend toward increasingly standardized authorizing practices would stymie the diversity of models in the charter sector and limit families' choices. Over the past year, we have sought to understand whether these hypotheses were true and what could be done. Of course, the world looks very different today than it did when we commenced this work.

Before the pandemic, the phrase “nontraditional school models” may have brought to mind Montessori schools, competency-based education, and dual-language programs. Today, the phrase is more likely to bring to mind virtual instruction, hybrid homeschooling, and learning pods. Moreover, few schools today are operating a “traditional” model. The pandemic is forcing educators, policymakers, and funders to fundamentally rethink how we sustain student learning in the midst of unprecedented disruption.

The lessons and recommendations surfaced in our research are more salient than ever and will help authorizers, school leaders, and others navigate another school year in the midst of a pandemic. In addition to the resources we initially created as part of our work on nontraditional schools, we developed a [complementary toolkit](#) that translates our findings into concrete guidance for school leaders and authorizers in the current moment.

In the short term, we hope this toolkit helps school leaders and authorizers collaborate on their approaches to sustaining learning over the coming weeks and months. And in the long term, we hope this collection of resources will inform how schools, authorizers, and others balance autonomy and accountability in service of creating a diversity of high-quality options for students and families.

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A young child is sitting on the floor, holding a wooden frame. The frame has two horizontal strips of paper. The top strip says "¡ Buenos días !" and the bottom strip says "Hay me siento ↑". In the center of the frame is a drawing of a girl with glasses. The child is looking at the camera with a slight smile. Another child is sitting to the right, looking towards the first child. The background is a wooden cabinet or shelf.

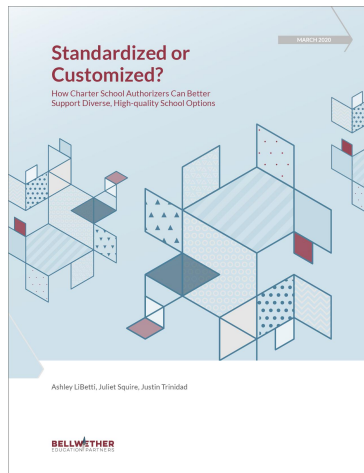
Introduction

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Capacity

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Metrics

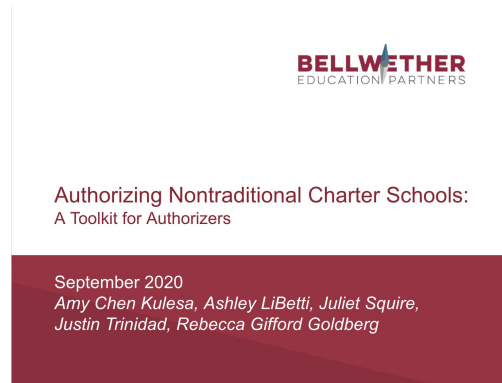
Strategies & Considerations for Improving Communication

This toolkit for school leaders is accompanied by a policy report and a toolkit for authorizers



Policy Report

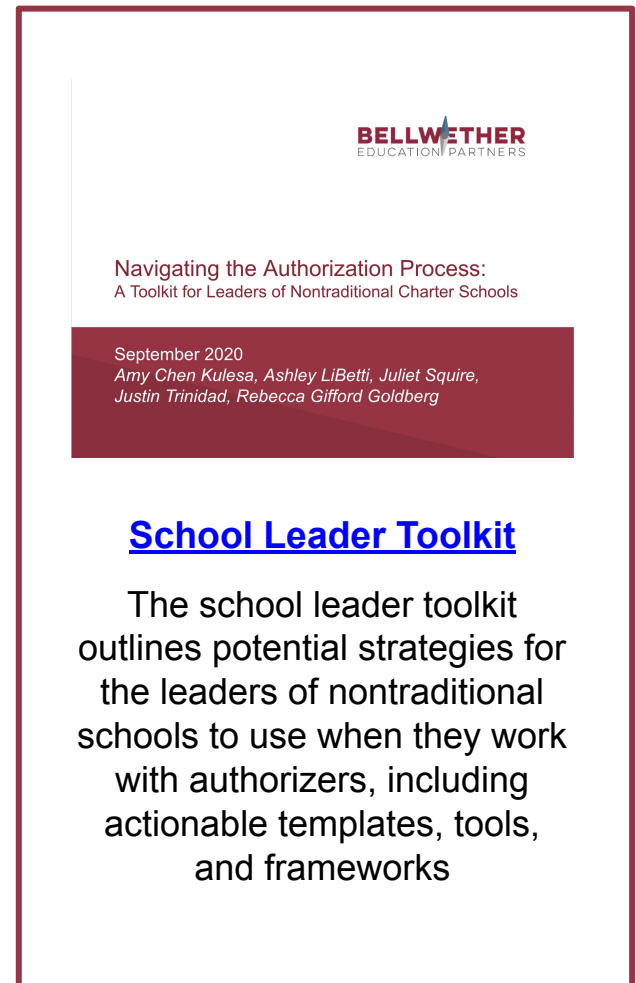
The policy report provides an analysis and detailed findings about the challenges and opportunities of authorizing nontraditional charter schools, with recommendations for authorizers, school leaders, funders, and policymakers



Authorizer Toolkit

The authorizer toolkit outlines potential strategies for authorizers to consider in their efforts to foster a diversity of high-quality options, with actionable templates, tools, and frameworks to guide their work

This document



School Leader Toolkit

The school leader toolkit outlines potential strategies for the leaders of nontraditional schools to use when they work with authorizers, including actionable templates, tools, and frameworks

Introduction

The ability to foster a diversity of school options is an essential value proposition of the charter sector. The one-size-fits-all approach has had limited utility, and charter schools are well-positioned to provide options that meet a variety of student needs; also, in a country as large as ours, charter schools can accommodate a plurality of family preferences about the education they want for their children. Charter authorizers, meanwhile, have a mandate to ensure school quality, and their standard measures of quality can be in tension with the very nontraditional school models that school leaders and families are interested in.

Authorizers and school leaders must work together to ensure schools are accountable for strong outcomes but not stymied from implementing nontraditional models.

In the accompanying [policy report](#), we identify authorizing practices that can disadvantage schools with nontraditional models and may artificially limit their ability to open and expand. In the toolkit that follows, we provide school leaders with a set of considerations, options, and tools to guide how they work with authorizers to address these challenges, ensure their schools provide high-quality options, and advocate on behalf of nontraditional models. We also provide parallel recommendations for authorizers in a [separate toolkit](#). Our goal is to shed light on the importance of authorizing nontraditional charter schools and how the challenges of authorizing nontraditional schools manifest in practice, as well as to provide action steps for authorizers and school leaders who are able and eager to lead the field on these complex issues.

Importantly, it is not our intent to provide an exhaustive list of all the scenarios that nontraditional schools and authorizers may face, nor to propose a “right” answer. Each school leader must consider the approach that makes the most sense given their constraints and local contexts. Rather, we hope this toolkit:

- **Informs school leaders about the authorizing challenges they may confront**
- **Illustrates opportunities and options for school leaders to navigate the authorizing process**
- **Shares useful frameworks for considering the benefits and trade-offs of these options**

Approach and methods (1 of 2): How do we define “nontraditional” schools?

There are a wide variety of school models. We began our analysis with more than a dozen school models recently identified and defined by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA):

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------|------------|-----------------------------|------|
| Diverse by design | Classical | “No excuses” | Vocational | Alternative/credit recovery | Arts |
| Special education | Inquiry-based | Early college | Policy | Gifted | STEM |
| International/foreign language | Blended/hybrid | Military | Virtual | Single sex | |

A subset of models provides particularly useful illustrations. For clarity and consistency, we focus on three models that often present challenges for authorizers; we exclude other models entirely.

We focus on:

- **Inquiry-based schools:** Revolve curriculum and practices around students “learning by doing” (e.g., Montessori, Waldorf, Reggio Emilia, and Expeditionary Learning models)
- **Dual language immersion:** Provide instruction in English and a target second language across subjects as a central component of their mission
- **Competency-based schools:** Provide students flexibility in how they demonstrate mastery of a particular skill or subject, allowing them to advance their learning independent of time spent on a subject

We exclude:

- **Schools designed to serve specific student populations**, such as students with autism, overage and under-credited students, or students in foster care. These schools also experience misalignment with standard authorizing practices, but merit a separate, thorough analysis

Though identified within this tailored analysis, the **opportunities and recommendations apply to many other nontraditional models**, including innovative models not yet conceived.

Approach and methods (2 of 2): How we identified the challenges nontraditional schools face with authorizing

How did we identify schools' challenges with authorizing?



To identify and understand how standard authorizing practices can create pain points for nontraditional schools, we reached out to our networks and solicited input from school leaders themselves.

Ultimately, **more than two dozen leaders of nontraditional schools shared specific examples of these challenges**, as well as some of the strategies they have used to navigate them.

We pressure-tested these challenges with staff from eight different authorizers and nine veterans of the charter sector.




Photo courtesy of Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action

Current situation: Nontraditional schools encounter challenges throughout five levers of the authorizing process

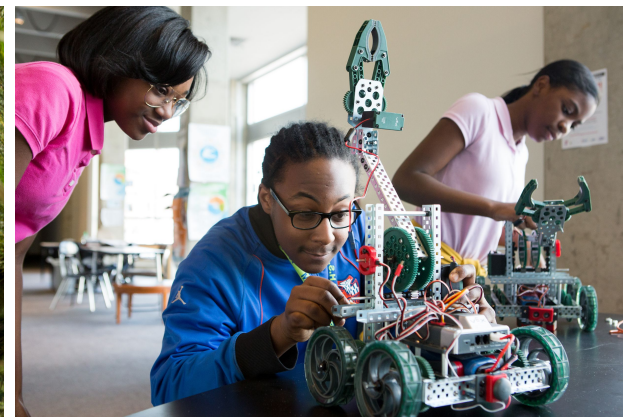
| Lever | Challenges for nontraditional charter schools |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Application, approval, and chartering | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School leaders must do more than others to make a case for their model, since authorizers who are unfamiliar with the model may perceive it as risky• School leaders must assess whether standard performance metrics conflict with their school model, or fail to capture their school's distinct value• School leaders may need to create new metrics, but often lack the expertise to do so |
| Monitoring reviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School leaders may find standard metrics do not accurately reflect schools' performance• School leaders may be incentivized to adopt practices in conflict with their model |
| High-stakes reviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School leaders may find performance on standard metrics more likely to put their schools on the cusp between renewal and closure• School leaders may find that rubrics for site visits and classroom observations are misaligned with their schools' instructional approaches• School leaders with nontraditional program designs, which take more time to fully launch, may find they are disadvantaged during the school's first high-stakes reviews |
| Model expansion | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School leaders may experience disadvantages in the expansion process, when authorizers base decisions on past performance on standard metrics• School leaders must do more to build the case for their model during expansion decisions |
| Soft levers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School leaders may be disadvantaged in conversations with authorizers if the authorizer does not understand the model or why its performance may look different from other schools• School leaders may miss opportunities to highlight successes of their models |

Individual challenges may seem small, but they accumulate. Ultimately, they limit the diversity of models available to students and families.

Challenges & strategies: School leaders can advance their work with authorizers in three important ways

| | Challenge | Strategies | Resources & Tools |
|---------------|---|---|--|
| Capacity | Limitations in knowledge, expertise, time, and resources constrain how school leaders tailor their approach to engaging with their authorizers | School leaders can strengthen access and effective use of data, and build authorizer awareness and knowledge of their specific models | For each challenge, the toolkit provides:  Description of challenges and strategies from the perspective of the school leader  Tools , including resources, frameworks, and considerations to support decision-making and to mitigate challenges  Case studies , with sample approaches of how some school leaders are implementing strategies to address challenges |
| Metrics | Authorizing performance metrics may be in conflict with or may not capture nontraditional school model's value proposition | School leaders can develop and share valid and reliable metrics with their authorizer that demonstrate outcomes aligned with their school model's bar of excellence | |
| Communication | Key stakeholders, including families, the community, and the authorizer, may not be familiar with nontraditional school models, their value, or why they present challenges for authorizing | School leaders can build trust and ongoing communications with families, the community, and the authorizer to proactively mitigate challenges | |

Intended outcomes: By addressing these challenges, school leaders can foster strong relationships with authorizers



School leaders have the opportunity and responsibility to ensure that **all students can flourish**, that **their schools are equally available to all families**, and that their schools are able to achieve **strong outcomes** for the students they serve. In collaboration with authorizers, school leaders must navigate the tension between **demonstrating quality against consistent standards** while **remaining true to the distinct value their models provide**. This toolkit seeks to encourage and inform that work, and we offer recommendations for how school leaders and other stakeholders can work to find the **optimal balance**. Ultimately, this toolkit aims to support a charter sector in which more **families have access to a diversity of high-quality options**.

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Introduction

Strategies & Considerations for **Improving Capacity**

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Metrics

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Communication

School leaders can consider ways to build their own capacity, as well as that of current or potential authorizers

Capacity: Description

Limitations in knowledge, expertise, time, and resources:

Both the school leader and authorizer may experience challenges in capacity. School leaders may not know **how to make a compelling case to the authorizer** about the distinct value of their nontraditional school model. They may also **lack the expertise or resources** to develop alternative or additional performance metrics. This may not only make it more difficult for school leaders to get nontraditional models approved, it can also create challenges for nontraditional schools during other phases of the authorizing process.

This can have at least five consequences:

1. Authorizers may **not know what nontraditional schools are, or their distinct value**
2. Authorizers may **penalize, not approve, or non-renew schools** whose quality is not fully reflected on standard performance metrics
3. Authorizers may **miss opportunities to encourage growth** of high-quality schools
4. Nontraditional schools may **not have the opportunity to demonstrate excellence**
5. Families and communities may have more **limited school options**

There are several strategies for how school leaders can build their capacity and that of potential authorizers

Capacity: Tools

To grow their capacity, school leaders can:

- ① Build authorizer **awareness** of their model
- ② Build **data and evaluation expertise** by:
 - ②a Investing in **internal** data capacity
 - ②b Collaborating on **shared** data resources
 - ②c Leveraging expertise from **partnerships** and national associations

① Build awareness: School leaders can be proactive in sharing the challenges some models often experience

Capacity: Tools

| Models | Example Challenges for More Common Nontraditional Models |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Dual Language Models | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Pacing of achievement: Since this model emphasizes language instruction in multiple subject areas in a target second language, students' proficiency rates may be lower on standardized tests conducted in English, especially in elementary grades● Achievement in other languages: Schools may not be rewarded for achieving their goals of language proficiency in the target second language |
| Inquiry-Based Models | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Multigrade classrooms: For multigrade classrooms, schools may have varying numbers of students in actual grade levels. Individual grade enrollment may not reflect overall demand, or outcome data may not reflect overall performance● Alignment with rubrics: Observation rubrics that reward teacher-student interactions are in tension with instructional components that encourage uninterrupted student-directed learning● Technology proficiency: Schools that actively avoid technology in the classroom may face a challenge on state assessments that are administered on computers, regardless of students' knowledge/proficiency |
| Competency-Based Models | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Seat-time requirements: State and authorizer requirements on hours of exposure to a subject or length of time in a class conflicts with models that measure students' ability to master a topic in other ways independent of time or duration● Learning progression: The sequence of instruction is different from other models, and therefore students may not learn the same content, in the same sequence, as is measured by standardized assessments |

① **Build awareness:** School leaders can anticipate and respond to authorizers' questions about their model

Capacity: Tools

School leaders can preempt common questions and leverage resources to respond

Questions to Anticipate

- ? Is this school model in demand from families? How do you know? What other schools have this model?
- ? What are the distinguishing characteristics of the model? How do they support student success?
- ? Do you expect students in this model would achieve proficiency at a different pace than others? Why?
- ? If students are expected to achieve proficiency over a longer timeline, what is that timeline?
- ? Do you anticipate that students will learn content in a sequence different from that on state tests? Why?
- ? How do you measure student growth internally, to inform continuous improvement?
- ? Does the school model rely on a particular style of pedagogy? If so, what should authorizers look for when observing student-teacher interactions?

School Leader Resources

Experts in a particular school model can consult with authorizer staff and make presentations to authorizer board

Peer school leaders can share their experiences and share best practices, either formally or informally

Authorizers who oversee schools with similar models can provide insight into their own approach and experiences

Partners who support the high-quality implementation of school models can provide an independent/outside voice

① Build awareness: School leaders have several opportunities to build authorizer’s familiarity with the model

Capacity: Tools

Where possible, school leaders should be **proactive**. It is easier to implement the strategies below *prior to* challenging conversations with the authorizer

Objective of School Leaders

Strategies

Educate authorizer about nontraditional school models

- **Describe differences** between your school model and more traditional school models
- **Invite authorizer to school events or tours** that exemplify your school to understand how different models look (e.g., student-led tour if your model features student-led learning)

Develop and share approach to measuring nontraditional school performance

- **Describe program approach and rationale** to ensure authorizer understands your instructional design (e.g., in ongoing communications, on school website, using videos, in annual report)
- **Quantify outcomes** of your school (e.g., family demand, longitudinal performance)

Deepen authorizer’s knowledge and/or respond to authorizer concerns

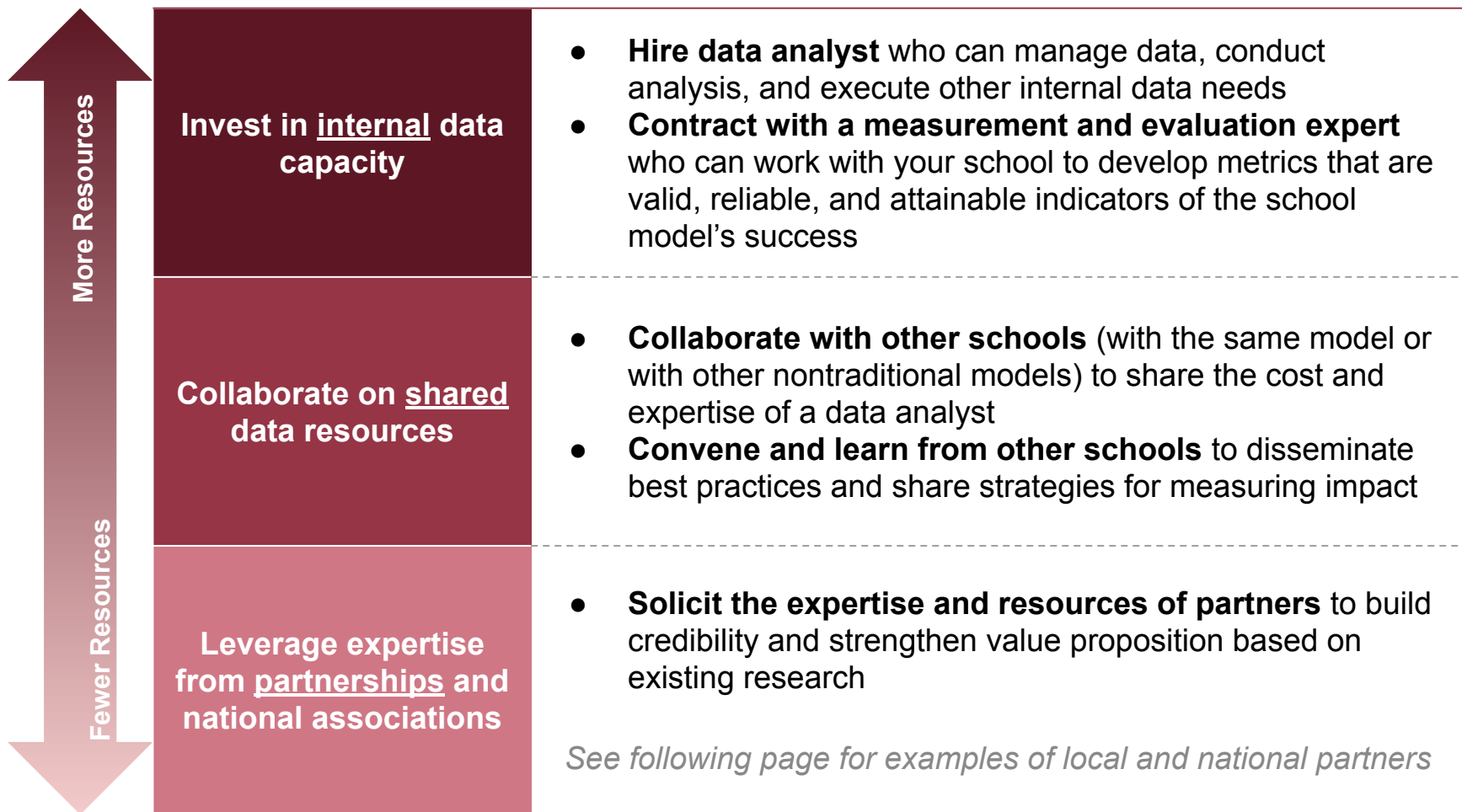
- **Connect authorizer with third-party experts** in the school model to speak with or consult the authorizing staff
- **Share the perspective or voice of advocates**, such as a families, alumni, or community members

If an authorizer does **not** have the resources for the above investments, a school leader could look to partner with an authorizer that does*

*Schools that transfer to other authorizers must be mindful of the potential that “authorizer shopping” is perceived as dodging accountability. See NACSA, “Ending Authorizer Shopping,” 2019.

2a **Data & evaluation:** Depending on available resources,
2b school leaders can consider ways to build their capacity

Capacity: Tools



Data & evaluation: School leaders can leverage partnerships and national associations for expertise

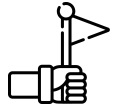
Capacity: Tools

By leveraging partnerships and other existing resources regarding nontraditional school models, school leaders can avoid reinventing the wheel and minimize the need for investing in internal capacity

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Local Organizations</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional charter networks that connect and support a range of charter schools (e.g., California Charter Schools Association, Northeast Charter Schools Network) • Intermediary support organizations, funders, nonprofits, and thought leaders that influence local education (e.g., New Schools for New Orleans, Education Forward DC) |
| <p>National Organizations</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National networks of charter school authorizers and/or school leaders (e.g., National Association of Charter School Authorizers, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools) • National organizations dedicated to supporting high-quality implementation of nontraditional models <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Inquiry-based schools: American Montessori Society, Association Montessori International/USA, National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector, EL Education ○ Dual language immersion/bilingual schools: Association of Two-Way & Dual Language Education; DC Language Immersion Project ○ Competency-based schools: Clayton Christensen Institute, The Learning Accelerator |
| <p>Researchers, Peers, & Experts</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders of other nontraditional schools to share and disseminate best practices • Measurement and evaluation experts to create or improve model-specific metrics • State or local universities to enable data/evaluation expertise |

School leaders shared examples of leveraging stakeholders and experts to build authorizer awareness

Capacity: Case Studies



Host authentic site visits to build authorizer awareness

School Leader Challenge:

The authorizer did not understand and misinterpreted a nontraditional charter school's model during the renewal process

School Leader Approach:

The school leader of an inquiry-based school invited the authorizer for a site visit to help the authorizer become more familiar with the school model. The site visit highlighted key design features of the model. For example, given the emphasis of student-voice and student-led learning in this school, the tour was led by students

"Our student-led tour has been incredibly effective. Our students can articulate answers far better than we adults do" - School Leader



Invest in research to learn from data

School Leader Challenge:

The nontraditional school lacked the expertise and resources to develop valid, reliable, and attainable metrics for its model

School Leader Approach:

The school leader invested in a researcher to examine the school's data. The school leader then shared the findings with the school board and authorizer. Findings were not incorporated into the performance framework, but they strengthened the school's credibility, as well as the authorizer's familiarity with the model

"We hired a researcher to look at everything we're doing — the good, bad, and ugly. We realized that there were so many variables that go unnoticed" - School Leader

Additionally, partnerships have bolstered the case for the approval of several nontraditional schools

Capacity: Case Studies



Partner with university to build credibility & learning

School Leader Challenge:

The authorizer was unfamiliar with the school model and hesitant to take a risk on it

School Leader Approach:

The school leader experienced resistance in early conversations with the authorizer. The school leader looked for model-specific experts and forged a collaboration with a local university that was interested in researching the model. The university provided credibility to the school; the school provided the university with opportunities for research.

“It was difficult to initially find an authorizer willing to take a risk on a new model. Ultimately, we got [a university] to sponsor us because of their knowledge and [interest in] research on our model.” - School Leader



Solicit support from local nonprofits

School Leader Challenge:

The school leader lacked the resources to develop a compelling case about the model

School Leader Approach:

The school leader was new to the local charter landscape and solicited support from a local nonprofit organization. The nonprofit connected the school leader to school model experts and provided resources and recommendations on how to navigate the political landscape.

“Oftentimes, school leaders of color might not have access to the playbook to get approved unless they had the opportunity to work with supporting organizations. It’s helpful to get support from local organizations to navigate the political landscape.” - School Leader

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Strategies & Considerations for Improving Capacity

Strategies & Considerations for **Improving Metrics**

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Communication

Standard performance metrics can be imperfect or incomplete measures of nontraditional schools' quality

Metrics: Description

Imperfect or incomplete performance metrics:

When school leaders are faced with standard performance metrics to assess school quality, they may find that the metrics **conflict with their school's instructional model** (see slide 13). In some cases, standard performance metrics may **not accurately reflect the performance** of nontraditional schools. In others, they **may not effectively capture key features** of a nontraditional school model.

This can have at least four consequences:

1. Nontraditional schools may **experience competing priorities**, between staying true to their model and meeting the demands of their authorizer
2. Nontraditional schools may be incentivized to **adopt practices in conflict with their model**, in order to perform better on standard performance metrics
3. When standard metrics do not accurately reflect their performance, nontraditional schools are more likely than others to be **on the cusp of renewal and non-renewal** and may find it more difficult to expand
4. School leaders may struggle to **translate success into metrics** that fit their model, have credibility with the authorizer, and are accessible to families and the public

School leaders can choose to address challenges with metrics in several ways; each has benefits and trade-offs

Metrics: Tools

Develop additional metrics, *but keep them internal*

- 1 School leaders may choose to develop additional metrics to guide continuous improvement of their model, but not share them with the authorizer

Develop additional metrics, *and share them with the authorizer*

- 2 Additional metrics can be shared informally, to build the authorizer's familiarity with the model and inform their professional judgment on key decisions
- 3 Additional metrics can be shared with authorizers, for formal accountability via schools' performance contracts and high-stakes reviews

There is no “right” answer. School leaders should carefully consider trade-offs and execute strategy with the expectation of making adjustments along the way.

1

School leaders may develop additional metrics, but not share them with authorizers

Metrics: Tools

First, there are benefits and trade-offs for school leaders who choose to develop additional metrics to guide continuous improvement of their model ...

Benefits

- School leaders and staff have metrics necessary to assess the implementation of the school model and inform continuous improvement
- School leaders and staff have metrics necessary to assess outcomes of the school model that are distinct from standard performance metrics
- The process of developing metrics can help school leaders codify their models, a prerequisite for eventually expanding or replicating their model

Trade-offs

- School leaders will need to commit resources to develop high-quality metrics, as well as to consistently collect and monitor data over time

If a school leader chooses to develop additional metrics, there are also benefits and trade-offs for keeping them internal

Benefits

- School leaders reduce the sense of external pressure that could lead them to make decisions based on the metrics instead of the model
- School leaders maximize flexibility to adjust the model and metrics over time

Trade-offs

- School leaders miss an opportunity to build authorizers' knowledge of the school model, and its distinct value add

- 2 School leaders may develop additional metrics, and
- 3 consider the purpose of sharing them

Metrics: Tools

If a school leader chooses to develop additional metrics, there are benefits and trade-offs for informally sharing them with the authorizer, to build the authorizer’s familiarity with the model and inform their decisions and practices ...

Benefits

- Authorizers better understand the school model, its implementation, and distinct value add to families
- School leaders can demonstrate progress on additional metrics, in order to augment the information authorizers use to inform key decisions
- School leaders can communicate to authorizers the school’s capacity and dedication to using data and evidence to inform continuous improvement

Trade-offs

- Authorizers may not have the capacity or expertise to incorporate additional metrics into their decisions and practices
- Authorizers could begin to pressure schools on additional metrics, even if the metrics are not intended for accountability
- Authorizers may perceive the school as trying to “explain away” or “dilute” standard performance metrics

If a school leader chooses to develop additional metrics, there are benefits and trade-offs for incorporating them into formal accountability via performance contracts and high-stakes reviews

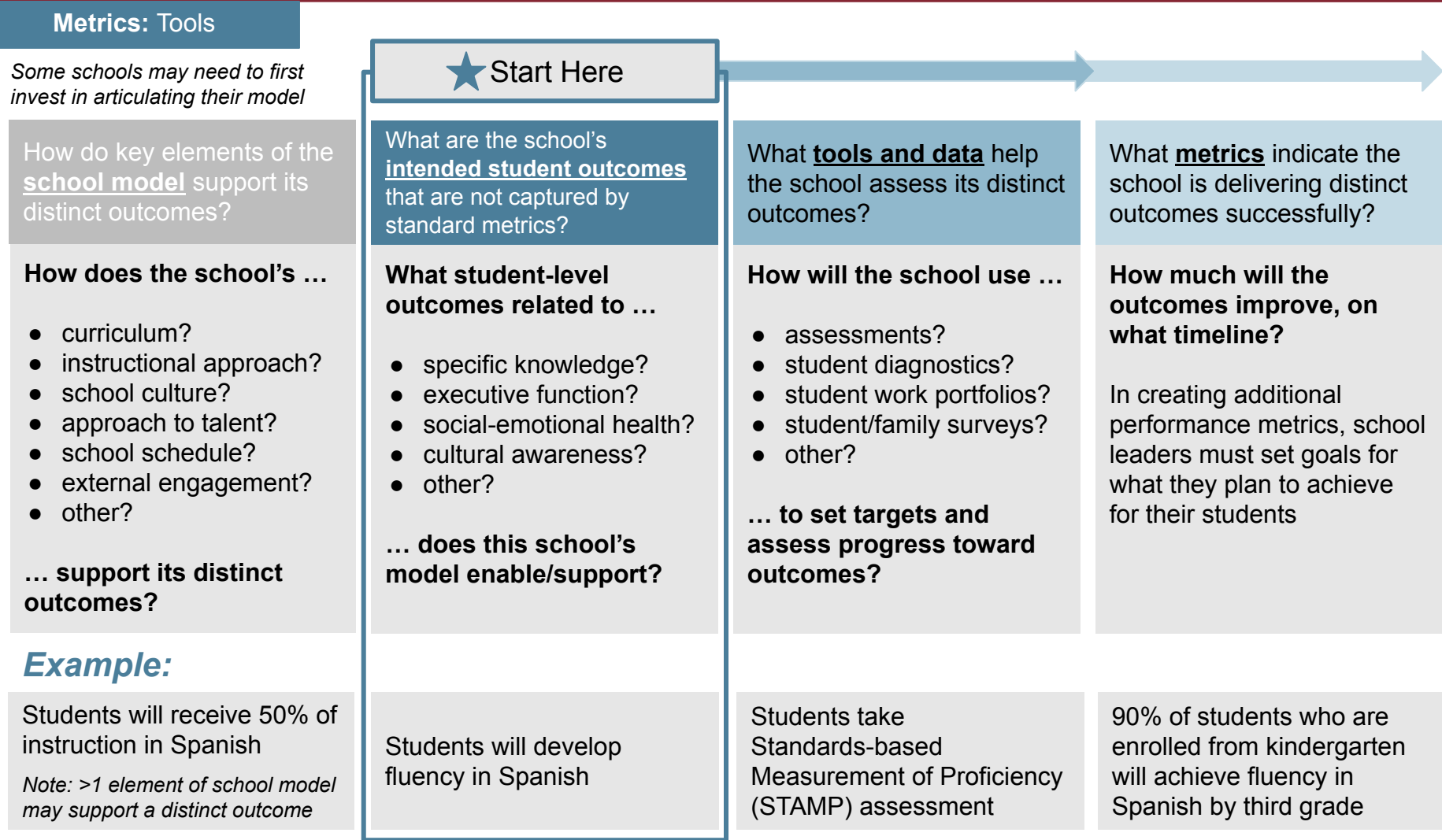
Benefits

- Authorizers can conduct a more comprehensive evaluation of school effectiveness and key features
- School leaders have additional incentives to prioritize delivering the distinct model they have promised to families and the community

Trade-offs

- School leaders may find it difficult to change metrics
- School leaders may find that sharing additional metrics adds unnecessary risk by increasing the number of metrics the school must meet, especially if the school can/will perform well against standard metrics

2 Additional metrics: Schools can develop additional metrics that reflect their distinct outcomes



Past efforts to develop additional metrics have often created confusion. If school leaders take this path, it is important to do it well.

2 Additional metrics: School leaders must ensure that

3 metrics are valid, reliable, and attainable

Metrics: Tools

| | Validity | Reliability | Attainability |
|-------------------|---|--|---|
| Definition | A metric is valid if the instrument measures what it intends to measure | A metric is reliable if it produces consistent results under similar conditions | A metric is attainable if it uses sources of information that are (or can be) available |
| Guiding Questions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the instrument measure what you want it to? Is the metric a worthwhile indicator of learning or progress? Is the metric difficult to manipulate or “game”? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there sufficient sample size? Is the data collection process consistent? Is there limited potential for bias in how data is collected and analyzed? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there a measurement instrument or source of data that is a suitable input for the metric? Is there a reliable way to collect data, now and in the future? |

| Example | Valid? | Reliable? | Attainable? |
|---|--------|-----------|-------------|
| To evaluate a school’s progress toward its mission of environmental education, a metric is based on the number of bottles collected during a recycling drive | X | ✓ | ✓ |
| To assess the quality of instruction, a school (or authorizer) uses a classroom observation rubric; however, evaluators who observe the same lesson rate it differently | ✓ | X | ✓ |
| To measure long-term outcomes, a metric is based on students’ earned annual income 20 years after high school graduation | ✓ | ✓ | X |

Sources: The Graide Network, “[Importance of Validity and Reliability in Classroom Assessments](#),” 2018; [US Government Accountability Office](#), “[Assessing Data Reliability](#),” 2019; TKI, “[Reliability and Validity](#).”

2 Additional metrics: School leaders should be mindful of

3 additional constraints for developing metrics

Metrics: Tools

Additional Metric Considerations:



Is there sufficient **sample size**?

Schools with smaller enrollment or analyses with smaller sample sizes may result in larger fluctuations in outcomes. Data with a small sample size can be supplemented with additional longitudinal data



Is the metric **consistently tracked** over time?

Ideally, metrics do not (or rarely) change. Consistent metric definition and collection enables year-over-year comparisons and learning for both authorizers and schools



Does the metric use a **consistent scale**?

While rubrics or characteristics that define quality may differ by school model, metrics that have the same scale enables easier comparisons across schools and models



Are there **too many metrics**?

The number of metrics depends on the number of components in a school model. Authorizers and school leaders should prioritize quality of metrics over quantity, and focus on what measures matter *most*



Is the metric **informing actions and decisions**?

A metric is meaningful only if it is used for an intended purpose, often to inform continuous improvement. Authorizers and school leaders should consider removing metrics that are no longer used to drive actions or decisions

School leaders have used additional metrics to strengthen their case for their model and others' understanding of it

Metrics: Case Studies



Supplement achievement metrics with growth

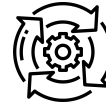
School Leader Challenge:

Standard performance metrics did not accurately reflect the performance of nontraditional schools

School Leader Approach:

A dual language immersion school was at risk for a nonrenewal due to reading performance of lower grade levels. They worked with their authorizer to supplement state assessment achievement data with normed referenced assessment growth information to make the case for student learning and progress toward proficiency

“We worked with our authorizer to examine assessment outcomes like NWEA MAP, given that the state doesn’t have student-level growth scores” - School Leader



Use data to articulate effectiveness of the model

School Leader Challenge:

Standard performance metrics did not effectively capture key features of a nontraditional school model

School Leader Approach:

As part of the renewal process, the school leader provided research and data evidence to show correlation between elements of the school model and outcomes such as attendance or student engagement. The additional metrics and clear articulation of logic for the model, with clear input variables for success, strengthened the case for renewal

“It’s important to show how components of our model connect, explain ‘This is why you’re seeing this, and this is how and why we’re doing this’” - School Leader

In some instances, school leaders have chosen to keep metrics internal

Metrics: Case Studies



Protect internal learning metrics that evolve

School Leader Challenge:

While additional metrics may highlight school's unique value proposition, additional requirements can also increase risks for closure

School Leader Approach:

A competency-based school leader considered incorporating additional metrics into the school's charter. However, given the value the school places on the continuous improvement of its model, school leaders were hesitant — especially metrics related to inputs to the model or outcome metrics that might evolve. For example, students at this school invest time and attention on grade-level projects, but project specifications may change within a charter contract cycle. Additional metrics could put the school at greater risk of closure by creating more opportunities for the school to miss a target; codifying the metrics in its charter would also make it harder to adjust them over time.

“The things we hold most dear, we don’t put in contracts. There is a risk that it would be under scrutiny with the state, that it can’t be changed, and we’re stuck for many years.” - School Leader

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Strategies & Considerations for Improving Capacity

Strategies & Considerations for Improving Metrics

Strategies & Considerations for **Improving Communication**

Effective communication with key stakeholders is crucial for fostering nontraditional schools

Communication: Description

Without effective communication strategies:

School leaders may find that authorizers do **not understand a nontraditional school's value proposition** or program designs. In addition, **families and the community** may find it difficult to discern what makes a nontraditional model different from other school options, struggle to assess a nontraditional school's quality, and find it difficult to make informed decisions about where to enroll their children.

This can have at least four consequences:

1. Nontraditional school models may **struggle to get approved** in the first place
2. Authorizers, families, and the community **may not understand the value** of a nontraditional school, or **perceive the school as lower quality** than it is
3. Nontraditional schools may find it **difficult to earn an authorizer's endorsement** for expansion; authorizers may be less likely to encourage them to grow
4. Nontraditional schools may **need to "defend" themselves** against standard performance metrics

Proactive and effective communications can mitigate challenges before they surface

Communication: Tools

To improve or establish effective communications, school leaders can:

- ① Use principles of strong communication to **tell the school's story**
- ② Build trust and collaboration with **authorizer**, with attention to timing
- ③ **Tailor and differentiate** communications with authorizer staff and board
- ④ Engage **families and the broader community**

① How school leaders communicate: School leaders can benefit from principles of strong communication

Communication: Tools

School leaders should consider the following best practices when addressing questions from authorizers and other stakeholders about their schools

- **Be proactive** by communicating the value of the school to the authorizer, explaining the model, and anticipating and addressing authorizer questions
- **Build and lean on strong relationships** with authorizer staff, local intermediaries, families, and other community partners to strengthen understanding of the school
- **Be evidence-based**, and use research and knowledge from partner organizations to make the case for the school
- **Be transparent** about areas where the school has demonstrated bright spots, as well as areas where the school is in a process of continued learning
- **Balance being comprehensive yet approachable** to address questions for a wide audience; avoid jargon
- **Provide examples** to ensure that abstract concepts are grounded in concrete illustrations of how the theory behind the school manifests in practice

① **What school leaders communicate:** Articulating the model and intended impact will help school leaders tell their story

Communication: Tools

What is the unmet need?

How will the school address that need?

What impact will the school have?

How will you know?

Answering questions about the school's model ...

What are the problems that the school will solve?

What elements of the school model are designed to address the problem?

What will be different when the school model is successful?

How will you know whether the school has achieved its intended impact?

... Will help school leaders tell their story

Our school is designed to address an unmet need in the community ...

We meet this need by implementing a school model that includes ...

Our model will create a learning environment that enables ...

We know our model is working because ...

② When school leaders communicate: Being proactive, especially with the authorizer, pays dividends down the line

Communication: Tools

There are ongoing opportunities for school leaders to communicate proactively

| Authorizing Stage | Sample Communications |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Application, approval, and chartering | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Begin conversations with authorizer about the nontraditional school model as soon as you begin to consider applying for a charter● Learn about the application criteria, including the authorizer's approach to nontraditional models, potential areas of flexibility, and non-negotiables |
| Monitoring reviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Highlight and share rationale for anticipated outcomes, providing research or data where available● Use consistent language and refer back to prior conversations, as needed |
| High-stakes reviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Reference rationale, research, and data shared in prior authorizing levers● Anticipate and advise authorizers if standard rubrics are a poor fit |
| Model expansion | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● If growth is in your plan, have ongoing conversations with the authorizer on expansion plans, rationale, and how you will assess readiness to grow |
| Soft levers | <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Include members of the authorizing staff on your school's community outreach and other communications (e.g., family newsletter)● Identify opportunities for families and students to convey key messages about the school model and quality |

③ To whom school leaders communicate: Communications should be tailored for authorizer staff and authorizer board

Communication: Tools

Understand stakeholders' interests

Authorizer staff and authorizer board members may have different priorities and needs. For example, authorizer staff may seek to limit risks while authorizer board may seek to accomplish political and/or community-oriented objectives.

Considerations:

- Who are my key stakeholders?
- What are each of their primary objectives?
- How do their objectives vary?

Tailor communications

School leaders can differentiate communication to meet the needs/interests of their stakeholders. For example, school leaders can speak more to quality metrics with authorizer staff and more to family demand with authorizer board.

Considerations:

- What data/evidence are relevant and compelling given the interest of this stakeholder?
- How can I tailor communications to align my objectives with the incentives of my stakeholders?

Utilize your network

School leaders don't have to navigate the landscape alone. School leaders can leverage school board members, community partners, and family advocates to brainstorm strategies and/or to provide additional voices in the conversations.

Considerations:

- Who are my advocates?
- How can I leverage my network?
- What perspectives can they add?
- Who are the best messengers for what I need to convey?

③ To whom school leaders communicate: Additional

④ communication strategies vary by stakeholder

Communication: Tools

School leaders should tailor communications depending on whom they are addressing

| Audience | Strategies |
|---|---|
| School leader communications with authorizer staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Clarify where traditional authorizing approach is (and is not) in conflict with your model, by sharing evidence-based rationale for model-specific nuances and by adhering to standard approach in non-model-specific areas (e.g., operations, finance) ● Collaborate with peer nontraditional school leaders, by sharing best practices and engaging in shared dialogues with authorizer |
| School leader communications with authorizer board | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish transparency, by proactively sharing knowledge and context of your nontraditional school model, including the approach and rationale of how authorizing tools and metrics may differ for your school model ● Build authentic engagement, by incorporating site visits and/or school model expert guest speakers to build the board’s awareness and knowledge of your nontraditional school model |
| School leader communications with families & communities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protect student and public interests, by making student well-being the value informing all decisions and supporting parents and students in being well-informed about their quality of education ● Offer approachable information, by developing accessible and transparent communication and information channels (e.g., family newsletter, open house) |

At times, school leaders need to translate and articulate their school models for authorizers

Communication: Case Studies



Document and share alignment of curriculum

School Leader Challenge:

Authorizer did not understand how inquiry-based school ensured standards were taught

School Leader Approach:

To articulate curricular resource alignment with state standards, an inquiry-based school leader documented how teachers' writing and planning are informed by standards, mapping out the process to help the authorizer develop an understanding of the rigorous approach. The documentation both informed the authorizer and was used as a resource for teacher professional development.

"We had to prove we're still teaching standards, just in a different way. The documentations and sample lesson plans helped." - School Leader



Map standard requirements to your school model

School Leader Challenge:

Authorizer did not see connections between competency-based checklists and the state's credit hour requirements

School Leader Approach:

To demonstrate compliance in graduation requirements, a competency-based school leader worked to document and translate a graduation checklist aligned to credit requirements. The checklist is not sequenced (e.g., students don't have to complete all of algebra before geometry), but the school does monitor progress toward completion.

"We work on translation a lot. We spend time translating our checklist to credits for a transcript and use that to communicate to external stakeholders." - School Leader

School leaders have implemented strategies to communicate effectively with families, as well as authorizer staff and boards

Communication: Case Studies



Multichannel and frequent family communications

School Leader Challenge:

The public and families may not understand the nontraditional school's value proposition or complex program designs

School Leader Approach:

To engage families, a dual language immersion school intentionally communicates using multiple channels. Weekly newsletters, monthly open parent meetings, and frequent calls home are all conducted in multiple languages. The school leader notes particular importance to communicate and engage families not yet familiar with the model.

"We invest in many ways of communicating the right story to all constituents and don't rely on one report to be the only narrative out there." - School Leader



Tailor communications with authorizer staff and board

School Leader Challenge:

Turnover or political changes within the authorizer board or staff may lead to different priorities that school leaders must navigate

School Leader Approach:

To navigate the political landscape, the school leader consulted with a school board member to map the priorities of the authorizer staff and board, including how they differ. The school leader then tailored talking points, intentionally elevating areas that are of interest to the specific stakeholder (e.g., highlighting strong family demand with authorizer board).

"There can be a disconnect between advice that authorizer staff members give (and what their incentives are) and what authorizer board members want and need." - School Leader

Appendix

Acknowledgments

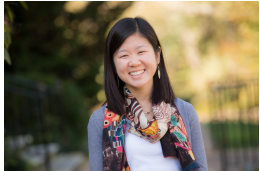
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