

EXPANDING ACCESS TO HIGH-PERFORMING CHARTER SCHOOLS

WHY AUTHORIZING MATTERS

Good charter school policy must be part of the solution to address our public education system's greatest problem: too many children lack access to a transformative education. Getting authorizing policy right is critical because good authorizing has the power to transform the lives of not just a few children, but millions.

When done well, authorizing is a catalyst for charter school quality and growth. Unfortunately, the quality of charter laws and authorizing institutions varies across the country, leading to uneven charter availability and quality.

NACSA's policy resources provide information that helps stakeholders understand common authorizing issues and increase the number of high-quality schools available to their students.

THE ISSUE IN BRIEF

The need for more quality public schools for U.S. children is as great as ever. One policy solution to help meet this demand is to grow more of what is already working. To expand access to existing high-quality charter schools, policymakers and authorizers remove barriers and make it easier to grow enrollment and expand locations.

Behind every charter school is an authorizer—and its responsibilities are essential to growing more great charter schools around the country. How can state policies help authorizers meet their communities' need for more great public schools?

This brief compares the policies that govern high-performing charter schools in three states with a variety of authorizing contexts—Florida, Missouri, and Louisiana—to provide examples for other states to consider.

COMPARISON CHART: THREE SAMPLE STATES' POLICIES

There are two crucial components of any policy on high-performing charter schools: (1) How a school qualifies as high-performing and (2) the opportunities for growth and expansion that come with this designation. The following table compares these components and highlights how often a school must be re-evaluated and by whom.

COMPARISON CHART: THREE SAMPLE STATES' POLICIES

	FLORIDA	MISSOURI	LOUISIANA
State Context	Florida established their charter law in 1996. Nearly 50 authorizers, almost exclusively school districts, oversee more than 650 schools and 300,000 students.	Missouri's charter law was enacted in 1998. It has 10 authorizers, including higher education institutions and a state charter board, and over 60 charter schools serving more than 20,000 students, primarily in St. Louis and Kansas City.	Louisiana was an early adopter of charter schools, passing their law in 1995. It has 11 authorizers which include local school districts and the state board of education. Over 150 charter schools educate 80,000 students.
Required criteria to qualify as a high-performing charter school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receive at least 2 school grades of "A" and none below "B" for the previous 3 years and an "A" in the most recent 2 years. Receive an unqualified opinion on each annual financial audit in previous 3 years. No revealing of financial emergency in most recent 3 years. <p><i>Note: Virtual schools are ineligible for high-performing status.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receive 85% or more of the total points on the annual performance report for 3 of the last 4 years. Maintain a graduation rate of at least 80% for 3 of the last 4 years. Be in material compliance with performance contract. Be organizationally and fiscally viable. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet or exceed for the 3 preceding school years the benchmarks established in the accountability system. Demonstrate growth in student academic achievement for the 3 preceding school years. Have no significant audit findings during the term of the charter agreement.
Policies to encourage growth and expansion of high-quality charter schools	<p>A high-performing charter school may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase enrollment beyond capacity identified in the charter. Expand grade levels. Submit a quarterly rather than monthly financial statement to sponsor. Consolidate multiple high-performing schools with the same sponsor into a single charter. Receive a modification of charter term. 	<p>High-performing charter schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are provided expedited opportunities to replicate and expand into unaccredited districts, a metropolitan district, or an urban school district with more than 400,000 inhabitants located in more than one county. Charter contract may be renewed for 10 years. 	<p>High-performing charter schools are granted automatic renewal and may open 2 additional schools that serve the same grade in the same enrollment boundary without a formal application to the authorizer.</p>
Renewal frequency and decision maker	Annual review and renewal overseen by the Commissioner of Education	Nothing specified	Nothing specified
Reference	FL Rev Stat § 1002.331	MO Rev Stat § 160.408	LA Rev Stat § 17:3992

ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Any definition of “high-performing” should include academic success and financial/operational health. All three states use different measures for academic success, based on their individual state’s accountability system. Each state also requires some version of financial viability.

Each state encourages high-performing schools to expand by making it easier to operate and grow, but in different ways. Florida not only makes it easier to add seats to existing schools, but also lessens some of the reporting burden which may increase the feasibility of adding students. While Missouri statute is vague on the exact privileges, it provides replication and expansion opportunities, as well as a longer charter term. The opportunities for Louisiana high-performing charter schools are significant: granting these schools automatic renewal and the ability to open additional schools without a formal application.

NACSA RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICIES ON HIGH-PERFORMING CHARTERS

- 1. Define “high-performing” beyond academics,** also considering financial and organizational practices. Ideally, academic qualifications should include state and federal accountability measures, growth, student achievement, post-secondary readiness, and mission-specific goals.
- 2. Clearly spell out opportunities** for those high-performing charter schools to grow or replicate. Include pathways to expand the number of seats, either at existing schools or through new ones, as well as ways to ease the administrative burden for the schools to make this more possible. Examples of this include longer renewal terms, less frequent financial reporting, and less intensive site visits. An additional benefit of this lighter administrative burden is freeing up more of the authorizer’s time to spend on struggling schools that need it.
- 3. Avoid making any decisions “automatic.”** While high-performing charter schools have certainly earned access to certain opportunities, authorizers still must review any expansion decision to ensure the school has carefully considered the necessary components and has the capacity to make the expansion successful.
- 4. Require regular review of a high-performer’s status** by a specified entity, most likely the state board of education. It should not be left solely to the authorizer to track requirements and eligibility.
- 5. Allow a single board to hold multiple charters.** This makes the replication of good schools much less onerous. It facilitates consistency of programs across schools and reduces the complexity and administrative burden of operating a high-performing network. Each individual school should be reviewed individually for academic, organizational, and financial compliance by their authorizer and held accountable for these, individually.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on this topic, please see NACSA’s report “[Replicating Quality](#).” For more information on charter school growth, see NACSA’s report “[Reinvigorating the Pipeline](#).”