



nacsa
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS

CORE RESOURCE GUIDANCE: CHARTER SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS AND DECISION MAKING

NACSA KNOWLEDGE



Empowering Excellence | Advancing Practice

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Overview

Charter school authorizers play a critical role in ensuring charter school quality. When they do their work well, authorizers can be a powerful force for expanding high-quality educational opportunities for children.

Conducting a rigorous and comprehensive application and decision making process is one of an authorizer’s key responsibilities. In this role, authorizers establish criteria for school approval and expectations for school performance and act as gatekeepers and stewards of the public trust. Authorizers are responsible for deciding whether a proposed charter school should be permitted to open, enroll students, and receive millions of dollars in public funding. A high-quality charter application review process is the essential first step in ensuring that only charter schools that are likely to succeed – academically, financially, and organizationally – are authorized to operate and permitted to serve children.

NACSA’s *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* sets forth four essential elements for a quality application and decision-making process:

- Proposal Information, Questions, and Guidance
- Fair, Transparent, Quality-Focused Procedures
- Rigorous Approval Criteria
- Rigorous Decision Making

Proposal Information, Questions, and Guidance may take the form of a Request for Proposals, charter application packet, or similar document that invites and guides charter applicants by:

- Setting forth the authorizer’s requirements and any priorities for charter proposals (such as for particular types of schools, or schools to serve certain communities);
- Articulating comprehensive application questions to elicit the information needed for rigorous evaluation of applicants’ plans and capacities; and
- Providing clear guidance and requirements regarding application content, format, and evaluation criteria.

Fair, Transparent, Quality-Focused Procedures ensure that all stakeholders—prospective applicants, members of the public, parents, and policymakers—are informed about the application process, understand its procedures and requirements, and have the opportunity to offer input and feedback. A

A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that includes clear application questions and guidance; follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants charters only to applicants who demonstrate a strong capacity to establish a quality charter school.

NACSA’s Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing: Application Process and

quality application process is open, well publicized, and transparent, and is organized around clear, realistic time lines.

Rigorous Approval Criteria ensure consistent evaluation and set clear, high standards for school approval. Rigorous criteria require all applicants to present:

- A clear and compelling mission;
- A strong educational program;
- A solid business plan;
- Effective governance and management structures and systems;
- Founding team members demonstrating diverse and necessary capabilities; and
- Clear evidence of the applicant’s capacity to execute its plan successfully.

Rigorous Decision Making employs highly competent internal and external review teams to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of each applicant’s proposal through thorough review of the written application, in-depth applicant interviews, and additional due diligence. In addition, written evaluations tied to the established approval criteria by all reviewers (both internal and external) are an important part of rigorous decision making – to document, justify, and support clear, merit-based recommendations to the authorizer board.

These four elements are all essential to create a high-quality charter application review and decision-making process.

NACSA’s Core Application Process Resources for Authorizers

NACSA’s Knowledge Core Course Module “The Charter Application Process & Decision Making: An Overview” (available [here](#)) provides an introduction to each of the four critical elements of a strong and comprehensive charter application review process and emphasizes the importance of maintaining high standards and conducting a rigorous evaluation of each proposed school.

As a supplement to the course module, NACSA is providing the following core resources, along with several example documents from recognized leaders in the field to help NACSA members develop high-quality tools for conducting their own application reviews. The Appendices provide three types of core resources, each of which is essential for conducting a sound application process:

- **Appendix A** includes a core charter school application, and example Request for Proposal documents, applicant questions, and guidance from three leading authorizers.
- **Appendix B** includes a core charter school evaluation criteria tool and the evaluation criteria documents used by the same three authorizers.
- **Appendix C** includes a core applicant interview guide for interviewers.

Each of these resources was developed by NACSA or by authorizers in collaboration with NACSA, and each meets NACSA’s standards for quality charter school authorizing.

Using the Core Resources and Example Documents

The core resources and accompanying documents in the Appendices are provided as examples of high-quality authorizing in practice. They come from authorizers varying in both size and agency type and from a variety of jurisdictions with differing policy contexts and legal requirements. NACSA encourages authorizers to adapt these core resources and example documents to fit their own needs and circumstances. As explained in the introduction to each appendix, however, each resource does contain essential elements that should not be removed or substantively modified. These essential elements are derived from NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* (available [here](#)) and are common to each core resource within each category.

About NACSA

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is dedicated to improving the quality of public education by improving the performance of charter school authorizers. NACSA is the oldest national organization devoted exclusively to strengthening charter schools by developing outstanding authorizers and is the trusted resource and innovative leader working with public officials and education leaders to increase the number of high-quality charter schools in cities and states across the nation. NACSA provides training, consulting, and policy guidance to authorizers and education leaders interested in increasing the number of high-quality schools and improving student outcomes.

About NACSA's Knowledge Core

NACSA's Knowledge Core is a new interactive web-based knowledge and learning portal designed to serve the professional needs of both novice and experienced charter school authorizers in carrying out their complex work. From the basics of authorizing to advanced topics, NACSA's Knowledge Core provides a rich array of core authorizing resources, training, guidance, practical tools, and professional networking opportunities to deepen NACSA members' knowledge and help them meet NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter Authorizing*. NACSA's Knowledge Core includes short interactive courses and self-paced, multimedia learning modules; easy-to-customize templates, protocols, and policies; a dashboard to track individual learning progress; and a discussion forum and searchable peer network to facilitate knowledge sharing among members.



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Appendix A: NACSA’s Core Charter School Application; Example Requests for Proposals and Applicant Instructions and Guidance

To guide charter applicants in developing strong school proposals and plans that respond to identified educational needs, authorizers should publicly issue either a Request for Proposals (RFP) or similar application information and guidance packet that:

- States any priorities the authorizer may have for charter schools (such as high schools, or blended-learning models, or schools to serve a particular community);
- States comprehensive application questions to guide applicants in providing information needed for rigorous evaluation of their plans and capacities;
- Provides clear guidance and requirements regarding application content and format; and
- Sets forth application evaluation criteria and standards for approval.

The charter application, petition or proposal should serve as a detailed blueprint for the proposed school – and it should provide evidence of the applicant’s capacity to carry out those plans. State law usually outlines minimum application requirements, but these are usually just broad content areas and do not give applicants enough guidance to develop strong, sufficiently detailed plans and proposals.

To enable applicants to develop strong proposals, and to provide the authorizer the information needed for sound chartering decisions, the RFP or application questions should require applicants to:

- State a compelling mission and vision for the proposed school;
- Present clear, detailed, and comprehensive descriptions of their **academic, organizational, and financial plans** for the proposed school; and
- Demonstrate their **capacity to execute those plans successfully**.

In issuing a charter school RFP or application guidance, authorizers should be sure to include distinct requirements for certain types of proposed schools or applicants, particularly:

- Applicants who are existing school operators or replicators (that is, they have schools whose performance record should be evaluated);
- Applicants proposing to contract with education service or management organizations;
- Applicants proposing to operate virtual or online charter schools.

Comprehensive, detailed application questions and clear guidance will enable applicants to produce stronger proposals that contain the information authorizers need to make sound decisions.

Appendix B: NACSA’s Core Charter School Application Evaluation Criteria; Example Criteria and Guidance

To ensure that only schools likely to **improve educational outcomes for students** are granted a charter, quality authorizers set high standards for approval and use rigorous and transparent evaluation criteria to assess the strength of each applicant’s educational, organizational, and financial plans. In addition to publishing comprehensive application questions and guidance as described in Appendix A, effective authorizers also issue clear, rigorous approval criteria to guide evaluation of proposals and inform applicants of the standards for approval. Some authorizers include the evaluation criteria in the application or accompanying guidance, while others publish the criteria separately.

Strong evaluation criteria require applicants to present or demonstrate:

- A clear and compelling mission;
- A strong educational program;
- A solid business plan;
- Effective governance and management structures and systems;
- Founding team members demonstrating diverse and necessary capabilities; and
- Clear evidence of the applicant’s capacity to execute its plans successfully.

Strong evaluation criteria also include distinct criteria for applicants who are existing school operators or replicators, those proposing to contract with education service or management providers, and those proposing to operate virtual or online charter schools.

Appendix C: NACSA’s Core Charter School Applicant Interview Guidance

An essential element of rigorous decision making for charter school proposals is the applicant interview. While evaluating the written proposal is the first step in reviewing a charter application, equally important is the second half of the review: conducting a substantive, face-to-face interview with the applicant group.

A **substantive, in-depth, in-person interview with the entire applicant team** is essential to thoroughly vet applicants, answer questions raised by the written proposal, probe for detail, and evaluate the applicant’s capacities to execute the school plan described.

The interview augments the written proposal, enabling authorizers to probe each applicant group’s plans and capacities to launch and sustain a high-performing school that fulfills its promised mission and expectations. Without a well-planned, detailed interview, a charter application review is only half-complete. Information from the interview can substantially change reviewer evaluations – either in favor of or against – a proposed school.

To ensure that interviews are conducted consistently across applicant groups and produce relevant and useful information for evaluating each applicant’s proposal, strong authorizers establish **interview protocols** and **train all interviewers** in these procedures so that they are well-prepared to conduct an in-depth, focused, and efficient discussion of each application. Detailed protocols, careful planning, and training for interviewers all facilitate a smooth interview process, a productive interview, and a comprehensive evaluation.