

THE STATE OF CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZING



2009

2ND ANNUAL REPORT ON
NACSA'S AUTHORIZER SURVEY



nacsa
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS



Acknowledgments

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NACSA is the most trusted resource and innovative leader working with educators and public officials 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 across the nation and improving student outcomes. Visit us at www.qualitycharters.org.

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May 6, 2010

Dear Colleagues:

As a new decade begins, charter schools continue to feature prominently in local, state and federal strategies to improve education. How well are charter schools performing? Do they have too much autonomy or too little? How are they being held accountable? How often do charter schools close and for what reasons? Charter school authorizers are at the center of these and many other important questions. Yet our understanding of authorizers and their practices is incomplete.

To form a more complete picture, we are pleased to present *The State of Charter School Authorizing 2009* — the second annual report on NACSA's authorizer survey. This report provides an overview of the number, types, and portfolio sizes of charter school authorizers. It also builds upon the data presented in the first report on NACSA's authorizer survey and is organized around NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*. NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* address topics of oversight that must be addressed during the life cycle of charter schools. The *Principles & Standards* create a framework for authorizer practice and highlight the importance of effective authorizing for the overall quality of the charter school initiative.

The *State of Charter School Authorizing 2009* delves deeper into the policies and practices of charter school authorizers and begins to answer some of the questions raised in NACSA's *The State of Charter School Authorizing 2008* report.

As NACSA seeks to grow the number of high-quality charter schools across the nation by setting professional standards and providing technical assistance directly to authorizers, we hope that the information in this report, *The State of Charter School Authorizing 2009*, will further inform your efforts to improve the charter school sector.

Sincerely,



Greg Richmond
President & CEO



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The performance of the entities that authorize charter schools is of critical importance to the continued growth and development of the charter school sector. Different types of entities serve as charter school authorizers. Depending on state law, authorizers can be school districts, state education agencies, higher education institutions, independent chartering boards, non-profit organizations, and mayors and municipalities.

In 2009, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) reported the results of its first annual survey of charter school authorizers. The survey, conducted during the 2007-08 school year, collected and analyzed basic data about these entities and how they conduct their business: from reviewing applications; to executing, enforcing and renewing contracts; to monitoring the academic, operational and financial performance of the schools they oversee.

This second annual report, based on a survey conducted at the conclusion of the 2008-09 school year, delves deeper into the policies and practices of charter school authorizers. In this new round, NACSA surveyed all of the nation's large authorizers (those with 10 or more schools in their portfolios), which collectively oversee more than half of the nation's charter school students and 64% of all charter schools.¹ In addition, NACSA surveyed a sample of smaller authorizing entities.

The goal of this ongoing effort is to enlarge awareness and understanding of the evolving role and responsibilities of authorizers in the areas of quality control and innovation.

Among the key findings of the 2009 survey are that large authorizers of all types share many values and priorities in the oversight of charter schools and that — to varying degrees — they have embraced many authorizing practices recommended by NACSA. Large authorizers appear to be rigorous in some areas, notably:

- **Reviewing applications for new charter schools.**

Eighty-seven percent of large authorizers, for example, report conducting face-to-face interviews with charter applicants and using the results to weigh applicants' likelihood of success. Among the factors that authorizers say they take into account during the review process, the quality of the proposed academic program ranks first.

- **Performance contracting.**

Ninety percent of large authorizers report signing formal contracts with each of the schools they oversee, and a large majority report including in their contracts specific performance expectations and goals, as measured by test results, student growth scores, comparisons with similar schools and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status.

- **Closing low-performing schools during the renewal process.**

In 2008-09, the closure rate among schools up for renewal by large authorizers was relatively high, with roughly one in seven (14%) not surviving the review process. By contrast, only a handful of schools (1%) were closed outside the renewal process, through either revocation or voluntary surrender of a charter. Closures that occur during the renewal process are more likely to be the result of sub-par academic performance; revocations or surrenders that occur outside of the renewal process are more likely to be the result of financial problems or compliance issues.

A number of large authorizers report not having adopted certain key practices, such as using external panels of experts to review new charter applications (52% do not); conducting face-to-face interviews with charter applicants (13% do not require interviews or do not rate them as important); requiring an annual financial audit of all charter schools (13% do not); and signing formal contracts with the schools they oversee (10% do not).

Some specific types of large authorizers, including independent chartering boards, report not having reviewed the charter of any of their schools as part of a renewal process during 2008-09. And among large authorizers, non-profit organizations appear to have the least rigorous application processes, as indicated by relatively high approval rates for charter applicants (50% compared with an overall approval rate of 38% for large authorizers).

The survey results also suggest that the issues of capacity and infrastructure remain major challenges for charter school authorizers. Among large authorizers, only 56% report having a budget dedicated to authorizing duties, and 48% do not feel that their organization allocates enough resources to fulfill its authorizing responsibilities.

Other key findings include the following:

- **Large authorizers typically provide fewer direct services to charter schools than small authorizers do, and are less likely to intervene directly in the operation of struggling schools.** Large authorizers are more likely to identify problems and require that they be addressed, but also to stop short of prescribing what should be done to fix them. By contrast, small authorizers are more likely to get involved in decisions about what a struggling school should do to improve.
- **Compared with non-district authorizers, district authorizers appear to treat their charter schools more like traditional public schools.** District authorizers are more likely to provide their charter schools with facilities or assistance in financing facilities; they are also more likely to take actions that can undermine the autonomy of charter schools. In addition, they are less likely than non-district authorizers to support performance standards for charter schools that are higher than those required by the state to meet AYP.
- **State education agencies (SEAs) appear to be operating in a challenging context and some have not adopted recommended authorizing practices.** SEAs are the most understaffed and under-resourced of the large authorizers. Some SEAs appear to treat charter authorizing like another state-run education improvement program, without accommodating the unique work associated with charter school

oversight. Among large authorizers, SEAs are the least likely to sign formal contracts with their schools, and are also less likely to support standards of academic performance that are higher than those required by the state to meet AYP.

The first section of this report provides a brief overview of the number, types, and portfolio sizes of charter school authorizers currently overseeing charter schools across the nation.

The midsection of the report outlines data from the latest survey, highlighting notable data and trends reported by large authorizers that responded to the 2009 survey. It is organized around NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*.² These principles and standards reflect the charter sector's consensus on best practices in authorizing across five key areas: application process, performance contracting, ongoing oversight and evaluation, renewal decision making, and agency capacity and infrastructure.

The next three sections analyze survey data in detail, including comparisons of: (1) large and small authorizers, (2) district and non-district authorizers, and (3) different types of authorizers. A final section discusses key implications of this research and future research questions.

Section 1: Profile of Charter School Authorizers



Currently, 40 states and the District of Columbia have charter school laws. These laws empower a variety of entities to authorize charter schools, creating an amalgam of authorizer types, characteristics, and powers in each state.

NACSA has identified six types of authorizers — the vast majority of which are school districts (local education agencies, or LEAs), followed by higher education institutions (HEIs), non-for-profit organizations (NFPs), state education agencies (SEAs), independent chartering boards (ICBs), and mayors/municipalities (MUNs).

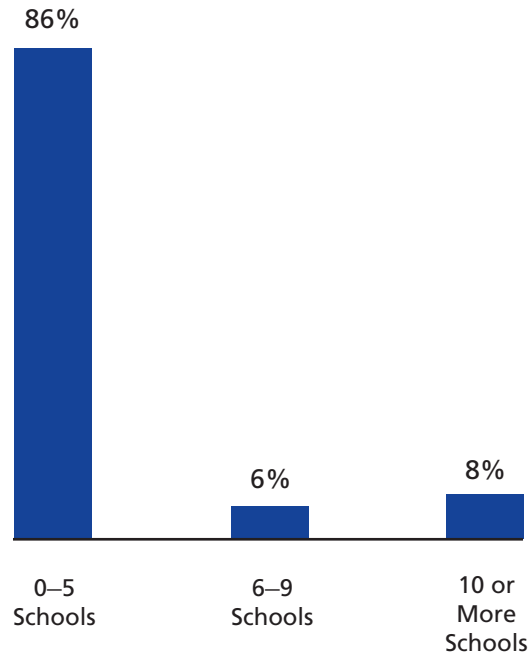
As of January 2010, there were an estimated 872 authorizers across the nation,³ up from 819 the year before. Collectively, these authorizers oversee and hold accountable 4,956 charter schools serving 1.6 million students.⁴ Table 1 shows the number and percentage of authorizers by type.

Table 1: Number and Percentage of Charter School Authorizers, by Type

TYPE	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
LEA	624	88	726	89	776	89
HEI	38	5	42	5	47	5
SEA	23	3	21	3	20	2
NFP	20	3	21	3	20	2
ICB	5	1	7	1	7	1
MUN	2	<1	2	<1	2	<1
Total	712	100	819	100	872	100

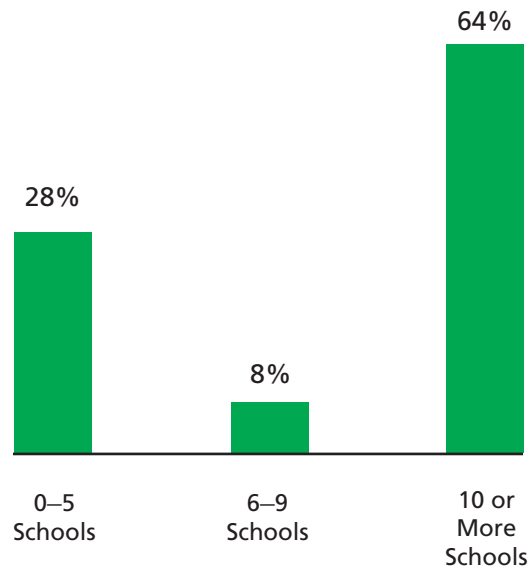
The number of schools that an authorizer oversees indicates the influence of that authorizer as well as the scale of its operations. Of the 872 authorizers identified by NACSA, 86% oversee five or fewer charter schools and only 8% oversee 10 or more schools (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percent of Charter School Authorizers, by Portfolio Size



While relatively small in number, the 70 large authorizers in the “10 or more” category collectively oversee more than half of the nation’s charter schools and roughly 59% of all charter school students.⁶ As Figure 2 shows, 64% of all charter schools in the nation are overseen by authorizers having 10 or more schools.

Figure 2: Percent of Charter Schools, by Authorizer’s Portfolio Size



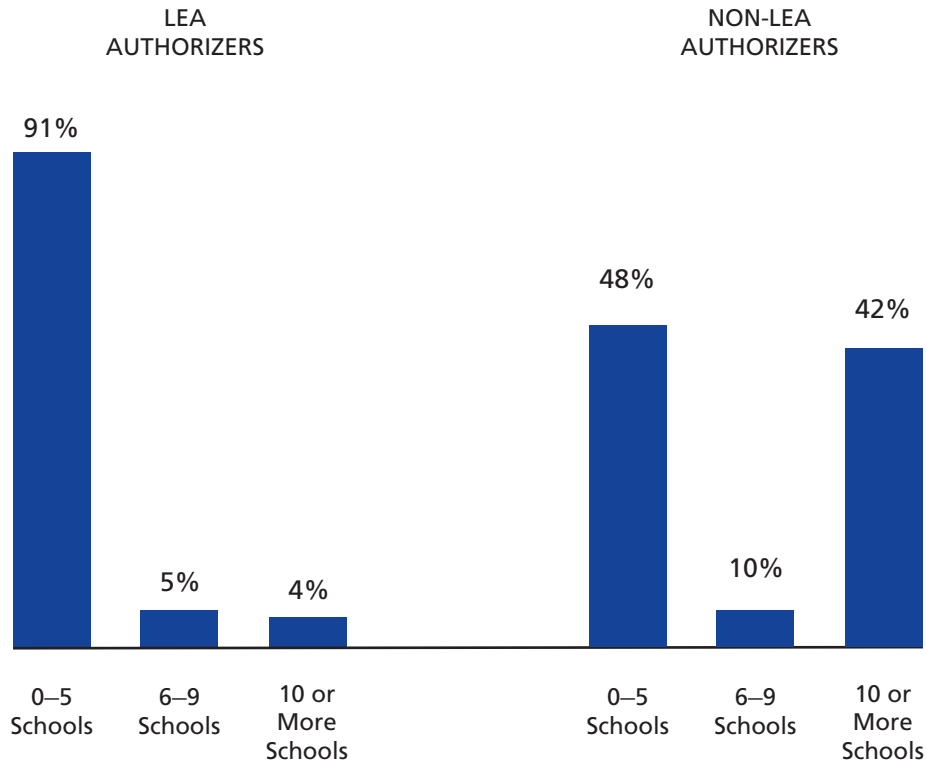
Portfolio size varies by type of authorizer. LEAs dominate the 0–5 school portfolio category, but decrease in percentage as portfolio size increases (Table 2).

Table 2: Portfolio Size, by Authorizer Type

TYPE	0–5 SCHOOLS	6–9 SCHOOLS	10 OR MORE SCHOOLS	TOTAL
LEA	706	40	30	776
ICB	1	1	5	7
HEI	32	6	9	47
MUN	1	0	1	2
NFP	10	2	8	20
SEA	2	1	17	20
Total	752	50	70	872

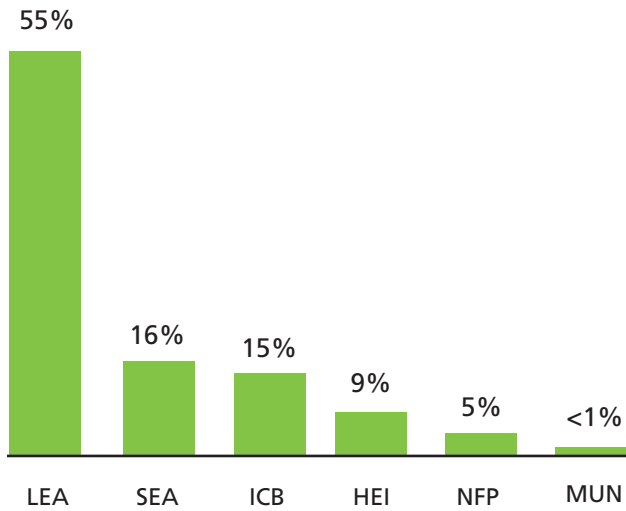
Ninety-one percent of all LEA (district) authorizers have portfolios of fewer than six charter schools, while the portfolio sizes of non-LEA (non-district) authorizers are more varied (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Portfolio Size, LEA vs. Non-LEA Authorizers



Several factors could account for the LEA authorizers' relatively small portfolio size. One possibility is that school districts may view chartering primarily as an opportunity to provide a niche program for motivated school leaders or unique populations of students. In some cases, districts have been forced into authorizing through a charter appeals process and consequently may not have embraced it as an opportunity to create new options for families. Finally, it may be that chartering districts have comparatively small student populations that limit the number of schools needed or the number of students interested in enrolling in charters. Despite their small average portfolio size, LEAs oversee the majority of charter schools in the nation (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of Charter Schools in the Nation, by Authorizer Type ⁷



DISCUSSION

While there are hundreds of charter authorizers in the country, the responsibility for overseeing schools is relatively concentrated within a smaller group. Seventy authorizers that have large portfolios of 10 or more schools oversee most of the nation’s charter schools. It is worth noting that the four largest authorizers in the country (the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, the Texas Education Agency, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the North Carolina Department of Education) collectively oversee more than 900 schools — about a third of all the schools overseen by survey respondents in the following pages.

Section 2: The Core Work of Large Authorizers

This section describes data and trends reported by the large authorizers that responded to NACSA's 2009 survey. Throughout this report, we use the term *large authorizer* to refer to those whose portfolios contain 10 or more schools. Large authorizers are of particular interest because: (1) they collectively oversaw more than half of the nation's charter schools and roughly 66% of all charter school students in 2008-09; and (2) data from the survey includes responses from 80% of all large authorizers in the nation in 2008-09, allowing us to report on their practices with considerable confidence.

This section and the three sections that follow it are organized around *NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, which reflect the charter sector's consensus on best practices in authorizing across five key areas: (1) application process, (2) performance contracting, (3) ongoing oversight and evaluation, (4) renewal decision making, and (5) agency capacity and infrastructure.

APPLICATION PROCESS

What procedures and processes do authorizers use to solicit and review applications from charter school developers?

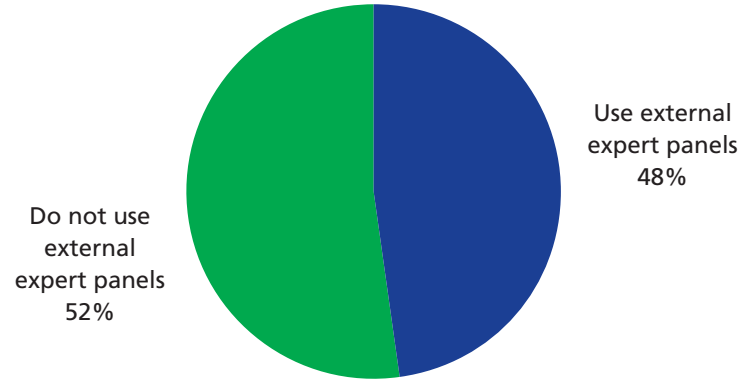
Of the large authorizers surveyed, 35% reported issuing annual requests for proposals (RFPs). Some authorizers issue periodic RFPs or formal calls for applications, while others respond to applications from interested parties. Using an RFP and published application procedures can help on two fronts. First, it establishes fair, transparent means for interested parties to apply for a charter. Second, it can help an authorizer recruit and promote schools that serve identified needs or specific student populations. This proactive approach has grown in use by larger districts that embrace chartering as a strategy for improvement.

"A quality authorizer implements a comprehensive application process that follows fair procedures and rigorous criteria and grants charters only to those developers who demonstrate strong capacity for establishing and operating a quality charter school."

— *NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*

Fewer than half (48%) of large authorizers responding to the survey reported using an external panel of experts to review new charter applications (Figure 5). Panels with members who are expert in different subject areas are important because successfully operating a charter school requires the ability to perform a variety of tasks, such as financial management, not-profit governance, and school leadership. External experts help insulate the application review from the political influence of applicants or other factors extraneous to the operation of a successful school.

Figure 5: Percentage of Large Authorizers Employing External Expert Panels



While the large majority of respondents reported that they conduct and value interviews with prospective charter school operators, 13% of large authorizers reported that interviews were either not required or not important (Figure 6). NACSA's *Principles & Standards* recommend face-to-face interviews as an important component of the charter application process. These interviews offer an opportunity for authorizers to explore the extent of the organizing team's capacity to implement what they have written as well as their understanding of what they have proposed to do.

Figure 6: Percentage of Large Authorizers Valuing or Requiring Applicant Interviews

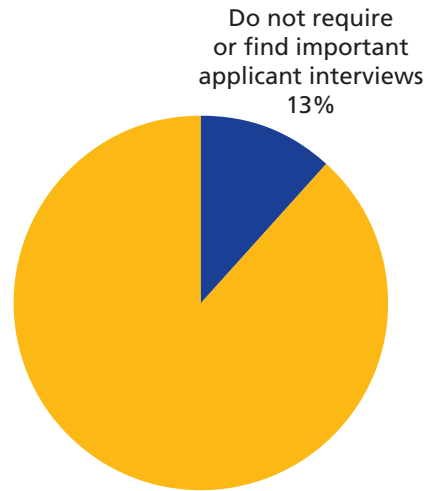
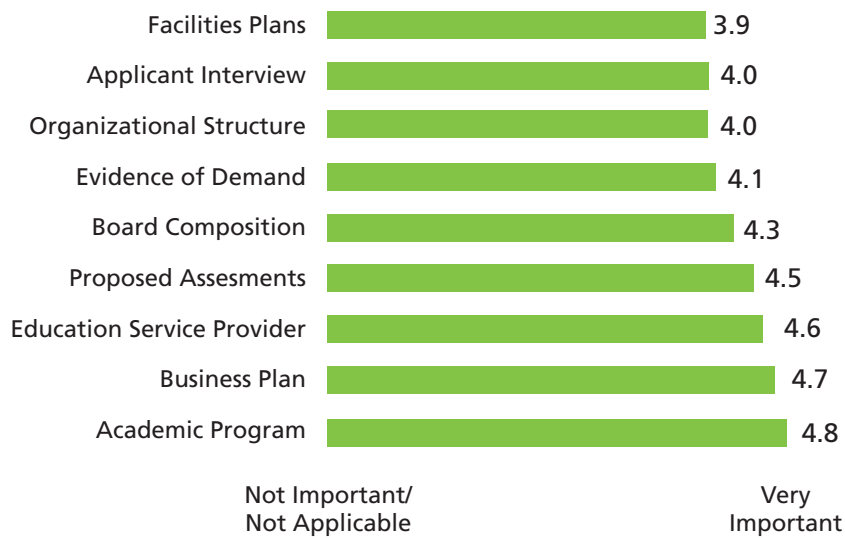


Figure 7 shows how large authorizers prioritize the factors they take into account during the application review process. The quality of the applicant's proposed academic program leads the list.

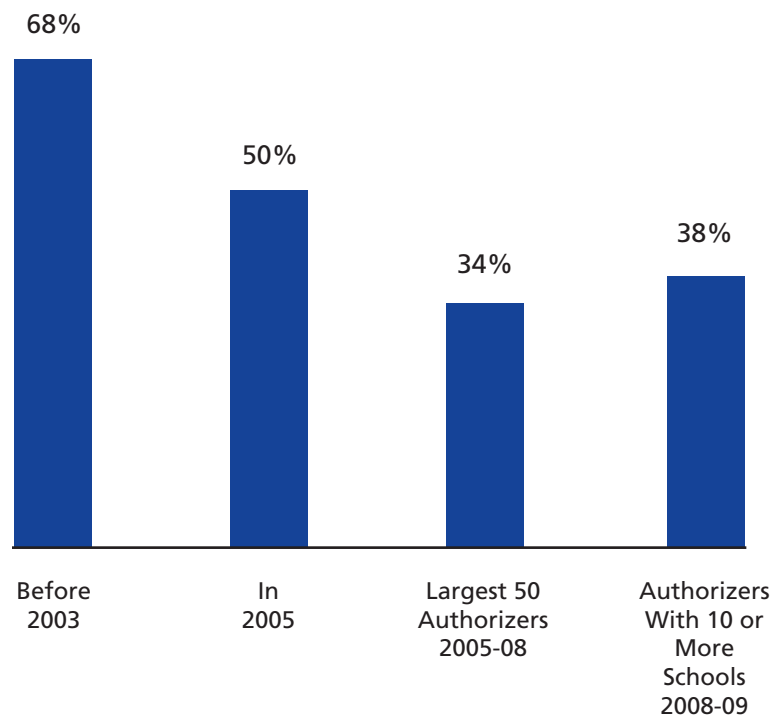
Figure 7: Factors Given the Highest Priority in the Application Review Process



Have application approval rates changed over the past several years, and to what extent do they vary by type of authorizer?

In 2005, NACSA provided national data that was used by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in its report, *Trends in Charter School Authorizing*.⁸ According to the 2005 report, the approval rate for new charter applications dropped from approximately 68% before 2003 to 50% by 2005. This trend has continued over the past several years, with NACSA surveys showing that between 2005 and 2008 the country's 50 largest authorizers received more than 1,400 applications for new schools, 34% of which were approved; and that in 2008-09, authorizers with 10 or more schools reported approving 38% of the applications they received. While the approval rate increased slightly during these two most recent periods, over time the changes have been more pronounced and approval rates remain much lower at this point than the rates reported five years ago (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Trends in Application Approval Rates⁹



There are several possible explanations for the general reduction in approval rates, including:

- Authorizers may be using more-rigorous standards to evaluate applications;
- Statutory caps limiting the number of new charter schools that authorizers can grant may force authorizers to deny applications they would prefer to approve;
- The supply of qualified charter applicants may be declining;
- Authorizers may feel pressure to grant charters only to “proven” models. This pressure may lead authorizers to prefer a smaller set of replicating schools and to deny charters to applicants that would operate schools without relationships to proven models or networks; and
- Some districts may be creating new schools that enjoy some of the autonomy of charters that are not truly charter schools. The opportunity to create these “charter-like” schools, operating within a larger district structure, may encourage educators to forgo the development of a charter school.

Given the simultaneous development of charter support organizations and other entities that help would-be charter founders, it is unlikely that the overall quality of charter applications has decreased while standards of review have either remained constant or been lowered. Anecdotally, authorizers that have been active since the first years of the charter movement describe recent applications as much more sophisticated and thorough than those they received earlier in the charter movement. It is more likely that the quality of applications has increased while approval rates have dropped, suggesting a higher level of rigor and standards in the review of charter applications.

Table 3 shows the average approval rate of new charter applications in 2008-09 among large authorizers, by type — ranging from 50% for non-profit organizations, at the high end, to 25% and 20% for higher education institutions and mayors/municipalities, respectively.

Table 3: Application Approval Rate, by Type of Large Authorizer

TYPE OF LARGE AUTHORIZER	AVERAGE APPROVAL RATE (%)
Non-Profit	50
Local Education Agency	39
State Education Agency	38
Independent Charting Board	33
Higher Education Institution	25
Mayors/Municipalities	20
Overall	38

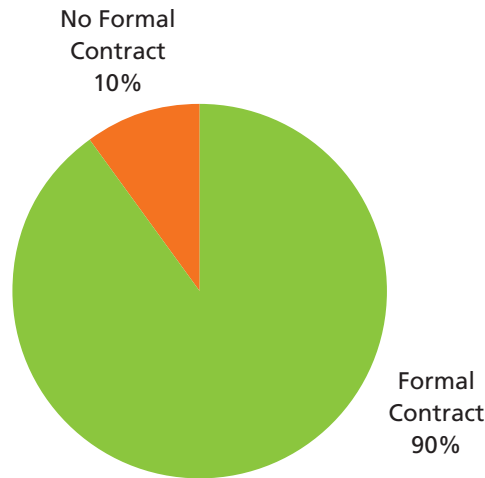
PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING

What provisions do authorizers include in contracts with the schools they oversee?

Contracts outline charter school performance expectations and clarify the roles and responsibilities of both the school and the authorizer. They serve to protect a school's autonomy and safeguard the school from an inappropriate end-of-term review that is not based on performance.

As Figure 9 shows, in 2008-09 all but 10% of large authorizers reported signing formal contracts with the charter schools they oversee — the same percentage reported in 2007-08. The proportion of authorizers that use formal contracts varies by type, from 100% of responding higher education institutions (HEIs) and mayors/municipalities (MUNs), to 95% of school districts (LEAs) and 75% of state education agencies (SEAs). The entities that reported not entering into contracts with their schools included authorizers from five different states and were a mix of LEAs, SEAs and non-profit authorizers (NFPs).

Figure 9: Percentage of Large Authorizers Reporting the Use of Formal Contracts



One possible reason for not having a contract is that a given state's law does not require a charter school to enter into a contract with its authorizer, and therefore some authorizers in that state may not opt to enter into contracts on their own. In the absence of a performance contract, a combination of the charter application and existing legal precedent drive interactions between schools and their authorizers.

Because of the importance of a contract, and at the request of NACSA, Congress included a provision in the 2010 federal spending bill that requires charter schools receiving federal start-up grants to have a contract. Congress also added provisions that require the use of annual financial audits for all schools and encourage authorizers to use achievement data from state accountability systems as the primary way of measuring student performance (for accountability purposes).

The contract between an authorizer and its charter school generally includes many elements. Table 4 summarizes those elements that large authorizers report addressing in their contracts. The high percentage of large authorizers incorporating similar elements suggests a growing consensus regarding the importance of certain provisions, ranging from performance standards, to waivers, to specific milestones that schools must achieve before opening.

“A quality authorizer negotiates contracts with charter schools that clearly articulate the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, expected success or failure, performance consequences and other material terms.”

— NACSA's Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing

Table 4: Contract Provisions Reported by Large Authorizers

REPORTED CONTENTS OF LEGAL AGREEMENTS	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)
Performance toward reporting and compliance requirements	92
A requirement for a governing board with legally valid bylaws	90
Definition of (and procedure for) contract amendment and dispute resolution	90
Expectations for compliance with procedural requirements of relevant federal programs	90
Performance toward fiscal goals	86
Specific milestones schools must meet prior to opening doors	86
Performance standards that provide the basis for renewal decisions based on state, federal, and charter requirements	86
Performance goals of student academic measures using growth data	84
Performance toward organizational goals	82
Performance goals on status assessments	82
Performance goals on evidence-based special measures	80
School Adequate Yearly Progress performance	79
Student academic performance on goals compared to other schools	78
Criteria and processes for intervening in a school's operations	77
Waivers from traditional public school laws and regulations	67

Particularly noteworthy are the number of large authorizers in 2008-09 reporting the inclusion in their contracts of accountability measures, such as student status scores (82%), student growth scores (84%), student scores compared to similar schools (78%), and school Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status (79%).

ONGOING OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION

What specific issues and activities do the staff of authorizing entities monitor, and what mechanisms do they use?

A majority of large authorizers reported using internal staff to monitor enrollment (88%), academic outcomes (79%), admissions lottery (75%), regulatory compliance (73%), school finances (68%), expulsions (66%), and implementation of federal programs (56%).

As Tables 5 and 6 show, the monitoring strategies and financial reporting requirements used by large authorizers vary. Large authorizers report using school-site visits, online and paper-based reports, and compliance reviews by outside agencies to monitor their schools.

“A quality authorizer conducts contract oversight that evaluates performance, monitors compliance, informs intervention and renewal decisions and ensures autonomy provided under applicable law.”

— NACSA’s *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*

Table 5: Monitoring Strategies Used by Large Authorizers

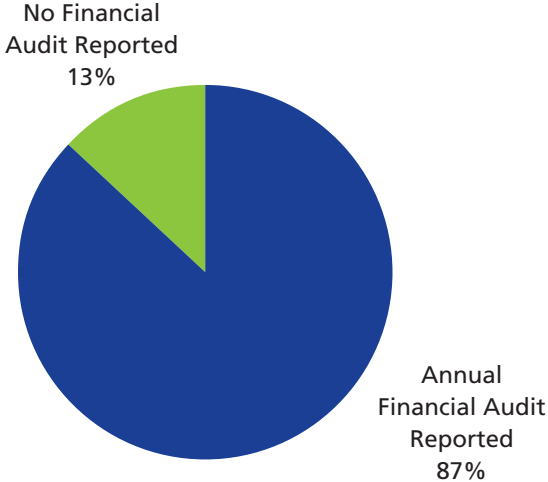
MONITORING STRATEGIES USED	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)
Reviews of academic performance reports, financial audits, and other paper-based reports submitted by schools	96
School-site visits performed by our authorizing organization	90
Information from an electronic student data system your organization requires its schools to use	60
Information from an electronic and/or web-based system schools are required to use to provide compliance, fiscal, and other operational reports	54
Compliance reviews by a state agency	52
School-site visits performed by an outside group	33
Compliance reviews by a local agency	15

Table 6: Financial Reports Required by Large Authorizers

REQUIRED FINANCIAL REPORTING	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)
Annual audits performed by an independent, qualified auditor	87
Annual reports	77
Annual budget projections	64
Quarterly reports	46
Monthly reports	42
No financial reporting required	0

Thirteen percent of large authorizers do not report requiring their schools to submit annual financial audits (Figure 10). Financial audits are necessary to document the fiscal soundness and propriety of independent, publicly funded institutions, especially ones as large and complex as charter schools. In follow-up interviews, respondents that do not require audits offer several explanations. Some authorizers receive audits that are required by state authorities, while others are aware of state requirements but do not report that they review the results of those audits. Other authorizers rely on different financial reporting mechanisms to oversee the financial operations of the schools they charter.

Figure 10: Percentage of Large Authorizers Requiring Annual Financial Audits



What actions do authorizers take when charter schools perform unsatisfactorily?

How — and to what extent — large authorizers intervene in the operation of struggling schools varies. As Table 7 shows, the two most frequently reported strategies are providing such schools with written notice of unsatisfactory performance and requiring the submission of a plan for improvement. Roughly half of respondents reported helping schools connect with consultants and other sources of assistance. Other strategies range from sponsoring workshops that school staff members are required to attend to mandating changes in school governance. These latter strategies may decrease the autonomy of a charter school and could inappropriately involve authorizers in making decisions about how a charter school should operate. Experienced authorizers warn that when authorizers recommend specific changes in charter school operations, later efforts to revoke a school’s charter may be unsuccessful.

Table 7: Large Authorizers’ Intervention Strategies

ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN SCHOOL PERFORMS UNSATISFACTORILY	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)
Provide the school, in writing, a description of the unsatisfactory performance	92
Require the school to submit a plan for improvement designed by the school and approved by the authorizer	83
Connect the school with organizations that can help them address the area(s) of concern	52
Deliver support services to the school in the area(s) of concern	48
Connect the school with schools that perform well in the area(s) of concern	40
Provide the school, in writing, suggestions for how to improve	38
Require school staff to attend workshops sponsored by the authorizer	31
Create a plan for improvement in partnership with the school	29
Require changes to the school’s board of trustees	25

RENEWAL DECISION MAKING

How many charter schools close each year, and why?

A charter school closes through one of three mechanisms: (1) non-renewal of a school's contract, which happens during the periodic review at or near the end of a charter contract term; (2) revocation of a school's charter by the authorizer, which happens outside the review process and leads to closure sometime during the term of the contract; and (3) voluntary surrender of a charter by school leaders, which can occur at any time and which is often a pre-emptive action taken by school operators facing the likely revocation or non-renewal of their charter. Which mechanism is used, and how often, depends on whether or not a school is up for review.

In 2008-09, 276 charter schools (out of approximately 2,495 total schools in the portfolios of the large authorizers responding to the survey) were reported to be up for renewal. Of those, 23 were closed because authorizers declined to grant their renewal petitions. An additional 17 charters are estimated to have been surrendered during the renewal process. During the same period, large authorizers reported revoking the charters of 18 schools prior to the contracted end of their charter term. An additional 9 schools are estimated to have voluntarily surrendered their charters prior to the contracted end of their charter term.

The closure rate among schools up for renewal is relatively high, with roughly one in seven not surviving the review process by authorizers (Figure 11). The primary reason authorizers report closing schools is inadequate academic performance, rather than financial or compliance-related issues (Figure 12).

By contrast, only a handful of schools (fewer than 2 in 100) are closed by large authorizers outside the renewal process; specifically, through revocation or voluntary surrender of a charter. These closures are more likely to be the result of financial problems rather than sub-par educational performance. Overall, 2.7% of charter schools overseen by large authorizers closed during the 2008-09 school year.

Figure 11: School-Closure Rate Among Large Authorizers, Within vs. Outside the Contract Renewal Process

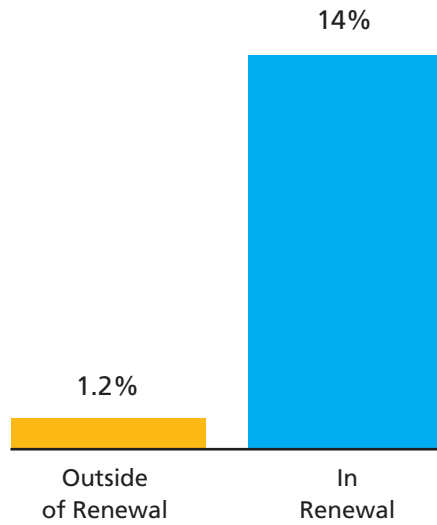
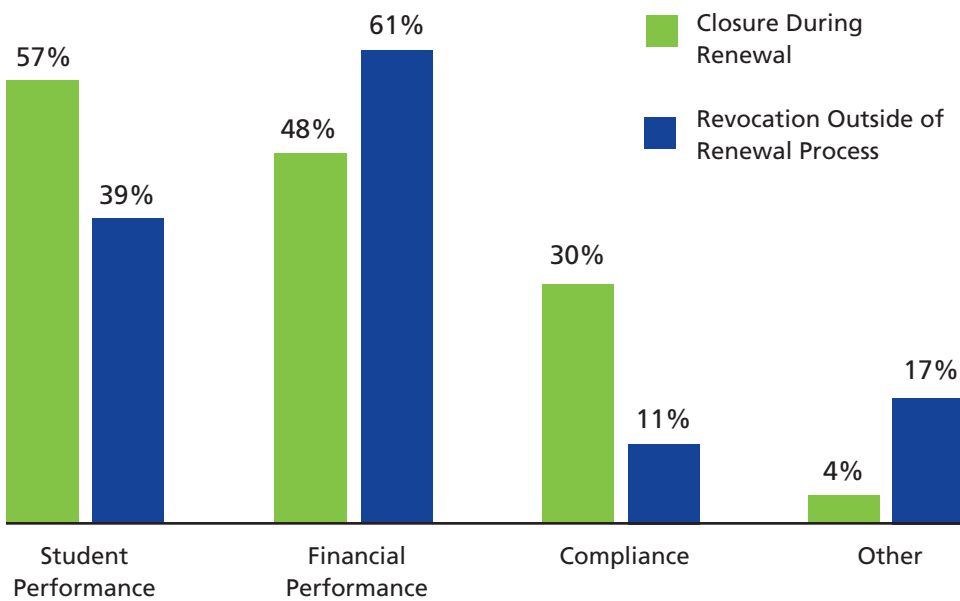


Figure 12: Primary Reasons for Closure Among Large Authorizers, Within vs. Outside the Contract Renewal Process*



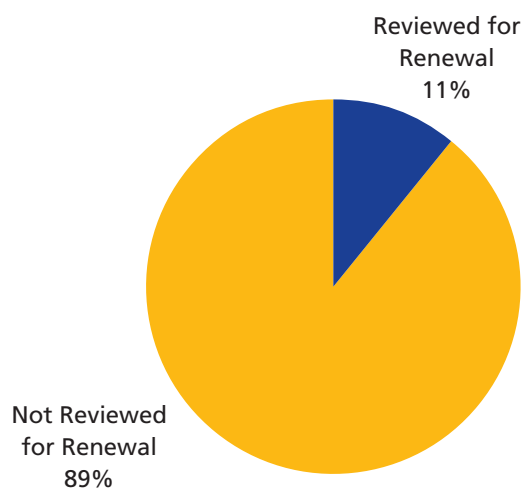
* Note: Respondents could select more than one reason for closure.

How frequently do authorizers review charter schools' contracts for renewal or non-renewal?

The regular review that occurs during the renewal process — which employs particularly rigorous scrutiny of schools' academic performance — is a key element of quality control in the charter sector. As Figure 13 shows, the survey results revealed that about 11% of charter schools were reviewed.

Among the possible explanations for the rate at which schools are reviewed are that authorizers may be updating charter contracts without a periodic review process, or that charter schools have contracts with longer terms — which is allowed in some states, primarily as a means to increase access to facilities financing. Currently, eight states (Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, and New Mexico) and the District of Columbia allow contract terms longer than five years. To ensure that performance meets acceptable standards, charter school contracts should allow for periodic review of a school about once every five years.

Figure 13: Contract Review Rate of Large Authorizers During 2008-09

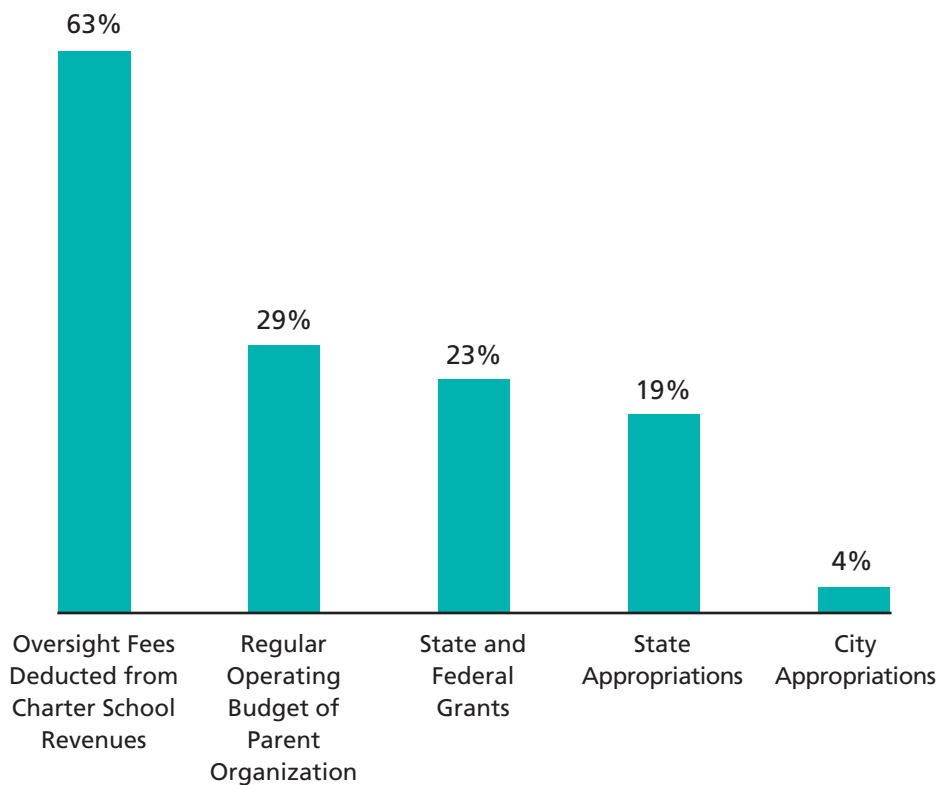


AGENCY CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

From what sources do authorizers receive funding? Are funding levels adequate to support their work?

The mechanisms for funding the work of authorizers vary from state to state. Some statutes provide for specific funding mechanisms, such as a percentage of charter schools' revenues; others are silent. As Figure 14 shows, the most frequently cited source of funding for large authorizers in 2008-09 was oversight fees deducted from charter school revenues, followed by the regular operating budget of a parent organization, state and federal grants, state appropriations, and city appropriations.

Figure 14: Funding Sources of Large Authorizers*



* Note: Respondents could select more than one source of funding.

The size of oversight fees deducted from charter school revenues by large authorizers varies depending on the type of authorizer (Table 8).

Table 8: Percent of Charter School Revenues Deducted as Oversight Fees by Large Authorizers¹⁰

TYPE	MEAN (%)	MEDIAN (%)	MINIMUM (%)	MAXIMUM (%)
LEAs	3.2	3.0	1.0	5.0
HEIs	2.6	3.0	1.0	3.0
NFPs	2.1	2.0	1.3	3.0
SEAs	1.7	2.0	1.0	2.0
ICBs	1.5	1.5	0.1	3.0
Overall	2.7	2.8	0.1	5.0

“A quality authorizer creates organizational structures and commits human and financial resources necessary for conducting its authorizing duties effectively and efficiently.”

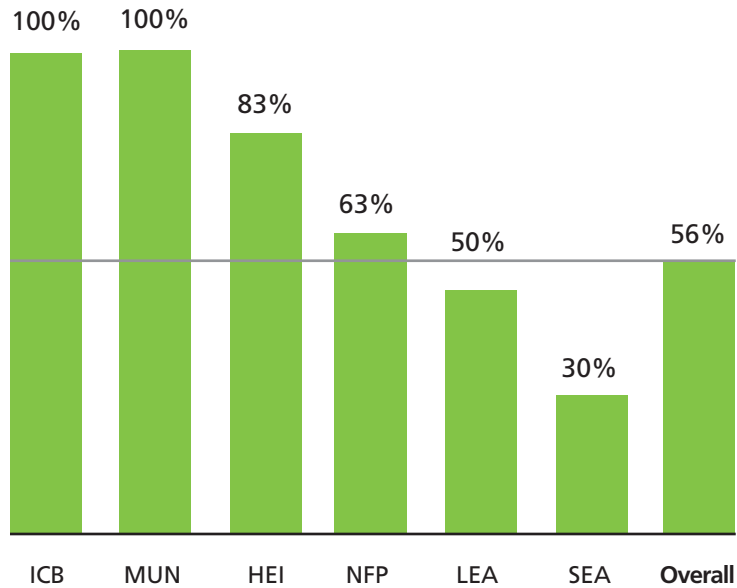
— NACSA’s Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing

Forty-eight percent of large authorizers do not agree that their organization allocates enough resources to fulfill its authorizing responsibilities. One respondent reported that no funds were available specifically for charter school authorizing. No clear consensus has developed about the best way to fund the work of authorizing. Indeed, NACSA believes that each of the various categories of funding has strengths and weaknesses (see *NACSA Policy Guide: Charter School Authorizer Funding*, July 2009).¹¹ Regardless of whichever method is in place, it is essential that authorizers have adequate resources to perform their duties.

How do authorizers manage and deploy their resources?

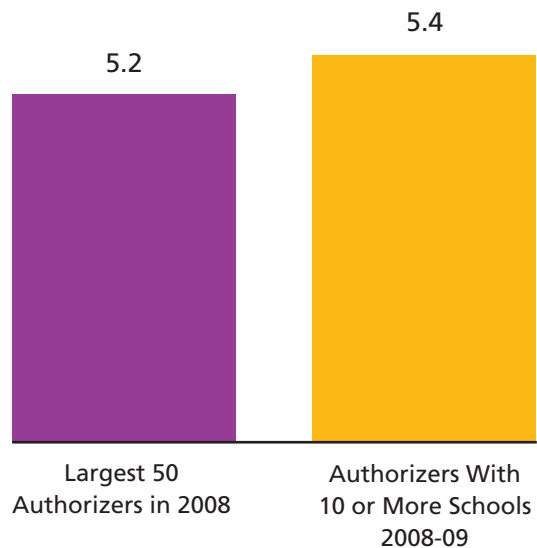
Fifty-six percent of large authorizers reported having a budget dedicated to authorizing duties. As Figure 15 shows, the percentage of large authorizers with such a budget varied widely by type: from MUNs and ICBs (100%) to LEAs (50%) to SEAs (30%). It is fair to interpret these data to indicate that SEAs are least able to provide a dedicated budget to their authorizing activities. Without a dedicated budget for authorizing activities, some SEA authorizers may have to perform their authorizing work as a secondary component to work that is funded through other mechanisms.

Figure 15: Percentage of Large Authorizers with a Dedicated Authorizing Budget



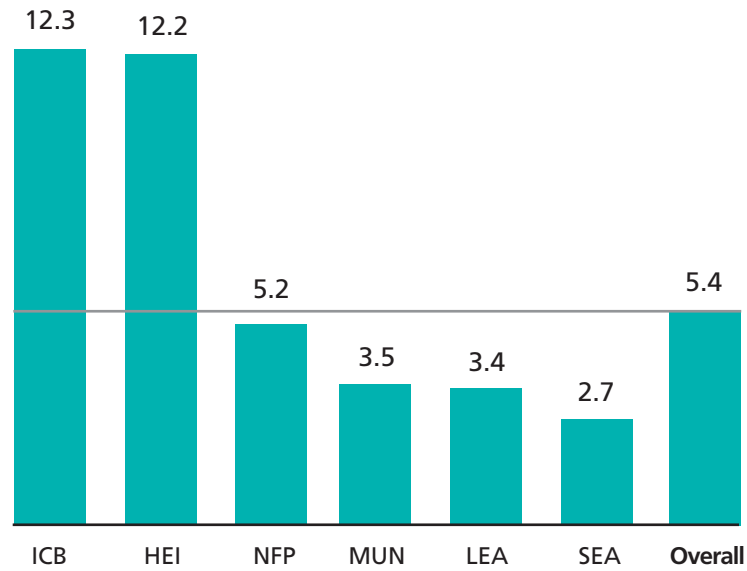
As reflected in Figure 16, the average number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees assigned exclusively to authorizing work has remained relatively stable from 2007-08 to 2008-09.

Figure 16: Average Number of FTE Staff Assigned Exclusively to Authorizing Work



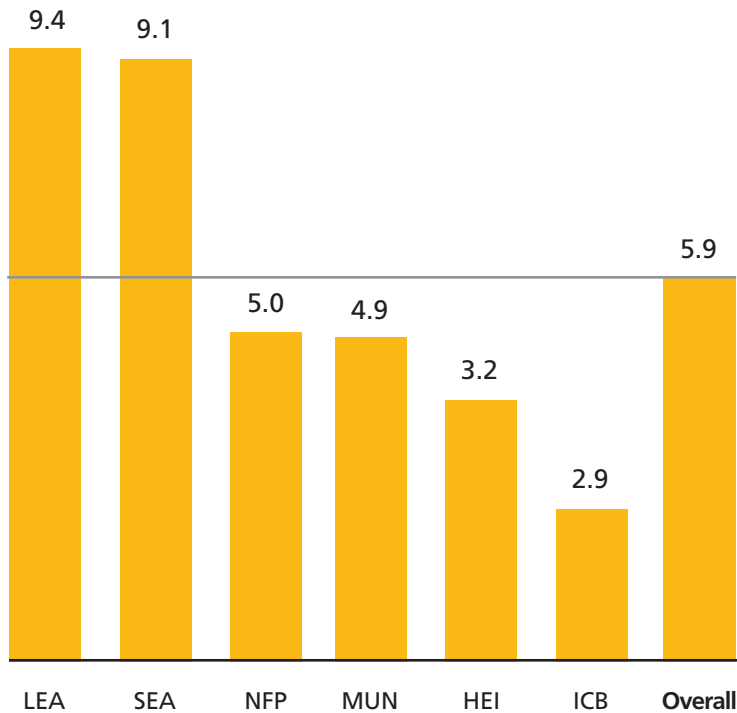
As Figure 17 shows, the average number of FTE staff devoted to authorizing duties varied from 12 (HEIs and ICBs) to 5 (NFPs,) and about 3 (LEAs, MUNs, and SEAs).

Figure 17: Average Number of FTE Staff Assigned Exclusively to Authorizing Work by Type of Authorizer



In addition to examining the number of FTE staff by type of authorizer, it is also important to examine the number of FTE staff in relationship to the number of schools overseen. Among large authorizers, the average number of charter schools per authorizing FTE was 1 FTE for every 5.9 schools (Figure 18). This value ranged from authorizers with no FTE staff assigned exclusively to authorizing duties, to an authorizer with 1 FTE for every 1.14 schools.

Figure 18: Average Number of Charter Schools Per Authorizing FTE



DISCUSSION

This section described the practices of large authorizers in detail. Best practices in authorizing, as established by the NACSA *Principles & Standards*, include a variety of tasks and activities, some of which require significant resources as well as the development and application of professional skills and expertise.

Based on their scale and experience, large authorizers should be able to assemble the necessary staff and resources as well as develop formal procedures that allow them to implement best practices. Most large authorizers do implement a broad set of best practices, indicating a growing consensus on the desirability of implementing a core of authorizing activities.

The large authorizers appear to be rigorous in some areas, notably: applying rigorous standards to the review of charter applications, applying standards higher than the state's AYP status as a measure of accountability, and closing a significant percentage of low-performing charter schools when their charter contracts come up for review.

We find in our survey responses, however, that some of the nation's largest authorizers fail to implement key practices. For example, 13% of authorizers do not interview applicants or value interviews as a tool to judge applicants; 52% do not use external panels of experts to review charter applicants; 10% do not enter into formal contracts with each of their schools; and 13% do not require each school to conduct an annual financial audit and file it with them.

Some of the variation in the large authorizers' ability to implement best practices may be based on the resources they dedicate to authorizing activities. Forty-three percent of large authorizers report that they have too few resources dedicated to authorizing, and SEAs appear to be the most poorly staffed and severely under-resourced of the large authorizers. Of the different types of large authorizers, SEAs most frequently fail to implement best practices.

Section 3: Comparing Large and Small Authorizers

The size of an authorizer's portfolio creates a context for the work of authorizing and affects the total resources an authorizer can dedicate to this work. Differences in portfolio size may also generate specific challenges that lead to different practices and policies among authorizers.

The following analysis outlines similarities and differences between the survey responses of large authorizers — those that oversee 10 or more schools — and small authorizers that oversee fewer than 10 schools. Appendix B provides a complete set of data tables comparing large and small authorizers.¹²

This section is organized by the main areas of *NACSA's Principles & Standards of Quality Charter School Authorizing*, which address issues that arise during the life cycle of charter schools, from the application process and performance contracting to ongoing monitoring/evaluation, renewal decision making, and the resources and staffing of authorizers.

It is important to note that this survey intentionally oversampled large authorizers, while the percentage of small authorizers responding to the survey was limited. Differences reported below are primarily of interest as indications of topics that would benefit from further study.

APPLICATION PROCESS

In 2008-09, large authorizers reported receiving more applications than small authorizers. The average large authorizer received 13.5 applications during that year, compared to 2.6 applications for the average small authorizer.

Large authorizers are more likely than small authorizers to issue requests for applications and publish timelines and other application-related material. Large authorizers are more than twice as likely as small authorizers to use external expert panels to review applications. There is little difference between large and small authorizers in the transparency of their application review processes. Similar proportions of large and small authorizers report publishing their standards and using similar standards to review all applicants. They are also similar in their application approval rates.

Table 9: Characteristics of the Application Process

APPLICATION PROCESS	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Authorizer uses an external panel of experts to review new charter applications.	23	48	35
Authorizer publishes timelines and materials for application submission, review and approval.	76	94	85
Application evaluation criteria are available to applicants.	86	88	87
Authorizer uses the same criteria when evaluating all applications.	95	94	94
Authorizer requires interviews and finds them important.	91	87	89

One hundred percent of small authorizer respondents reported entering into contracts with their schools, whereas 10% of large authorizers reported not doing so. Large and small authorizers reported a comparable list of contract elements, and they prioritized those issues similarly as well. Small authorizers reported including language in contracts about the criteria and processes for intervening in a school’s operations more frequently than large authorizers did.

Table 10: Reported Contents of Legal Agreements with Charter Schools

CONTENTS OF CONTRACTS	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
School AYP performance	87	79	83
Criteria and processes for intervening in a school's operations	85	77	81
A requirement for a governing board with legally valid bylaws	96	90	93
Student academic performance on goals compared to other schools	73	78	75
Performance toward fiscal goals	82	86	84
Specific milestones schools must meet prior to opening doors	82	86	84
Performance goals on status assessments	84	82	83
Waivers from traditional public school laws and regulations	69	67	68
Performance goals of student academic measures using growth data	83	84	84
Performance toward organizational goals	83	82	83
Performance goals on evidence-based special measures	81	80	80

ONGOING OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION

Large and small authorizers are similar in the extent to which they monitor: student performance status and growth, comparisons to similar schools, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status, and performance on school-specific measures. Large and small authorizers also report similar approaches to monitoring organizational goals, fiscal performance, and compliance with state and federal regulations.

Large authorizers are more likely than small authorizers to support renewal criteria that are higher than AYP. Forty percent of large authorizers support setting renewal criteria higher than AYP, compared to 25% of small authorizers that report doing so.

Table 11: Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Renewal Criteria

STATEMENT COMPLETION: AUTHORIZER SHOULD SET RENEWAL CRITERIA THAT:	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Are higher than AYP	24.5%	40.4%	32.0%
Are the same as AYP	41.5%	36.2%	39.0%
Could be lower than AYP	17.0%	8.5%	13.0%
Do not use AYP	17.0%	14.9%	16.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Small authorizers are more likely than large authorizers to provide multiple services to schools. In some cases services may be required by law, such as special education services that must be provided by Local Education Agency (LEA) authorizers. Small authorizers, which are predominately LEAs, are thus more likely to be legally responsible for special education services than large authorizers are. As they bear the legal responsibility if special education services are found to be out of compliance with requirements, many LEAs insist on being involved in the design and provision of special education services delivered at the charter schools they oversee.

Table 12: Services Provided by Authorizers

SERVICES	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Financial services	66	36	52
Training on improving instruction	89	60	70
Special education services	72	47	60
Data analysis	74	57	66
Special education requirements training	85	71	78

When a school performs unsatisfactorily in a specific area, small authorizers are more likely than large authorizers to provide suggestions for improvement and to create plans for improvement in partnership with the school. Large authorizers are more likely to identify a problem in a struggling school, but less likely to get involved in helping to solve it.

Table 13: School Interventions

ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN SCHOOLS PERFORM UNSATISFACTORILY IN ONE OR MORE AREAS	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Provide the school, in writing, a description of the unsatisfactory performance	69	92	80
Create a plan for improvement in partnership with the school	52	29	42
Connect the school with organizations trusted to help them address the area(s) of concern	30	52	40
Require changes to the school's board of trustees	7	25	15

Table 13: School Interventions... continued

ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN SCHOOLS PERFORM UNSATISFACTORILY IN ONE OR MORE AREAS	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Connect the school with schools that perform well in the area(s) of concern	23	40	31
Require the school to submit a plan for improvement designed by the school and approved by authorizer	70	83	76
Require the school to attend workshops held by authorizer	18	31	24
Provide the school, in writing, suggestions for how to improve	49	38	44
Deliver support services to the school in the area(s) of concern	56	48	52

RENEWAL DECISION MAKING

In 2008-09, small authorizers reported a greater percentage of the schools in their portfolio reviewed for renewal (25%) than did large authorizers (11%).

Large and small authorizers reported similar priorities in judging renewal decisions for their charter schools across a wide variety of topics. The rate at which they review schools for renewal or non-renewal varies, as does the extent to which school closures are likely to occur during the renewal process (rather than at some other point in the life cycle of a school).

Small authorizers are more likely than large authorizers to close schools by a means outside of the renewal process. In addition, the closure rates by means both outside of and during the renewal process are nearly the same among charter schools overseen by small authorizers, whereas large authorizers display large differences in the closure rate depending on whether a school is up for review.

Table 14: School Closure Rate, Within vs. Outside the Renewal Process

SCHOOL CLOSURE RATE	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Outside of renewal	5	1	2
During renewal	6	14	13

AGENCY CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The average large authorizer assigns 5.4 total full-time equivalent (FTE) staff to authorizing work, whereas the average small authorizer assigns one FTE. Large and small authorizers report similar staffing levels when measured as a rate of FTE per school they oversee — about .2 FTEs per school.

Large authorizers are slightly more likely than small authorizers to deduct oversight fees from charter school revenues (63% vs. 54%, respectively). Small authorizers report charging higher oversight fees — an average of 3.9% compared with an average of 2.7% for large authorizers.

Large authorizers are about twice as likely as small authorizers to report having a budget dedicated to authorizing activities. Fifty-six percent of large authorizers report having dedicated funds for authorizing, compared to 30% of small authorizers. Large authorizers are also more likely to draw on federal or state grants to support authorizing, while small authorizers are more likely to draw on funds from their parent organization.

Table 15: Sources of Authorizers' Funding*

SOURCES OF FUNDING	SMALL AUTHORIZERS (%)	LARGE AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Oversight fees deducted from charter school revenues	54	63	58
Operating budget of parent organization	44	29	37
State appropriations	16	19	18
State and federal grants	7	23	14

* Note: Respondents could select more than one source of funding.

DISCUSSION

The differences between large and small authorizers reflect expected differences in capacity as well as differences due to the LEA status of many small authorizers. However, as the next two sections will show in some detail, neither LEA status nor portfolio size alone accounts for all the differences in practices.

Generally, large authorizers are more likely to proactively publish requests for applications and to employ expert external panels in reviewing charter applications. Almost all small authorizers report entering into contracts, whereas several large authorizers report not using contracts with their schools. Most of those that fail to use contracts are SEAs, which are described more in Section 5. Large authorizers also support applying higher academic standards to their schools than do small authorizers, although both large and small authorizers tend to include a similar list of items in their contracts.

Small authorizers provide more direct services to charter schools, which could be partially explained by the proportion of districts that appear to be more directly involved in, and responsible for, the operations of the schools they oversee. When schools struggle, the large authorizers, including large districts, are more likely to stop their interventions at the point of identifying problems that schools must figure out how to fix on their own, whereas small authorizers are more likely to get involved in decisions about what a struggling school should do to improve.

As for high-stakes renewal decisions, some of the largest authorizers review their schools less frequently than do small authorizers. In fact, some of the largest authorizers reviewed no schools during the 2008-09 school year. But when schools are up for review at the end of their charters, large authorizers are more likely to close schools than small authorizers.

As expected, large authorizers enjoy a resource advantage for authorizing activities. They have more total staff and resources, more dedicated budgets, and more diverse sources of funding than do small authorizers. The notable exceptions are SEAs, which report a lack of dedicated resources and staff more often than other large authorizers.

Section 4: Comparing District and Non-district Authorizers

This section compares district and non-district charter school authorizers. For the purposes of this discussion, non-district authorizers include independent chartering boards (ICBs), higher education institutions (HEIs), state education agencies (SEAs), non-profit organizations (NFPs), and mayors/municipalities (MUNs). While most small authorizers described in the previous section are local education agencies (LEAs), many district authorizers oversee large portfolios and there are also many non-district authorizers that oversee small portfolios.

School district authorizers operate in a different context from other types of authorizers. Unlike many other types of authorizers, their charter schools are contained in a distinct geographic location and are typically a small component of their school portfolios. These factors may generate specific conflicts and challenges that lead to the implementation of different authorizing practices. Despite these factors, district and non-district authorizers are similar in many respects.

The following analysis outlines similarities and differences between the survey responses of district and non-district authorizers. Appendix C provides a complete set of data tables comparing the two groups.¹³

APPLICATION PROCESS

District authorizers are slightly less likely than non-district authorizers to publish timelines and materials for application submission, review, and approval (80% vs. 91%, respectively), but more likely to make the application evaluation criteria available to applicants (92% vs. 80%, respectively). District authorizers are considerably less likely than non-district authorizers to use external panels of experts to review new charter applications.

Table 16: Characteristics of the Application Process

APPLICATION PROCESS	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Authorizer uses an external panel of experts to review new charter applications.	50	24	35
Application evaluation criteria are available to applicants.	80	92	87
Authorizer publishes timelines and materials for application submission, review, and approval.	91	80	85
Authorizer uses the same criteria when evaluating all applications.	95	94	94
Authorizer requires interviews and finds them important.	89	89	89

In 2008-09, the average non-district authorizer received more applications than the average district authorizer — an average of 10.8 applications for non-district authorizers compared to an average of 5.2 applications for district authorizers. District and non-district authorizers report similar application approval rates (Table 17).

Table 17: Application Approval Rate, 2008-09 School Year

	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Average Approval Rate	38	40	39

The 2009 authorizer survey included a number of questions about the values and priorities of authorizers in application evaluation. Overall, non-district authorizers and district authorizers appear to share the same values in this area.

Table 18: Average Rated Importance of Application-Related Factors, on a Scale of 1 (Not Important/Not Required) to 5 (Very Important)

APPLICATION PROCESS	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS	OVERALL
Interview	4.1	3.7	3.9
Composition of proposed governing board	4.4	4.1	4.2
Organizational structure	4.2	4	4.1
Facilities plans	4	4.1	4.1
Likelihood of success of proposed academic program	4.8	4.7	4.7
Academic success/financial viability of proposed education service provider	4.6	4.5	4.6
Financial viability of the school’s business plan	4.8	4.7	4.7
Evidence of demand	4.1	4.1	4.1
Plan for using assessments to measure student progress	4.5	4.5	4.5

PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING

Ninety-eight percent of responding district authorizers report signing legal agreements with their charter schools, compared to 91% of non-district authorizers. District and non-district authorizers address similar topics in their legal agreements, although district authorizers are less likely than non-district authorizers to include in their contracts performance goals on student academic measures that use growth data. District authorizers are also less likely to report including specific milestones that new charter schools must achieve prior to opening.

Table 19: Reported Contents of Legal Agreements with Charter Schools

CONTENTS OF CONTRACTS	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Performance goals on student academic measures using growth data	89	79	84
Specific milestones schools must meet prior to opening doors	89	80	84
Performance standards that provide the basis for renewal decisions based on state, federal, and charter requirements	91	86	89
Criteria and processes for intervening in a school's operations	84	79	81
Student academic performance on goals compared to other schools	73	77	75
Performance goals on evidence-based special measures	83	79	80
Performance toward organizational goals	85	81	83
Performance toward reporting and compliance requirements	96	92	93
Requirement for a governing board with legally valid bylaws	91	95	93
Waivers from traditional public school laws and regulations	70	67	68
Definition of and procedure for contract amendment and dispute resolution	93	90	91
Performance goals on status assessments	84	82	83
Performance toward fiscal goals	85	83	84
Expectations for compliance with procedural requirements of relevant federal programs	94	93	93
School AYP performance	83	83	83

District authorizers appear to support lower academic standards than non-district authorizers for their charter schools. Non-district authorizers are more likely than district authorizers to support criteria that are higher than Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Forty-nine percent of non-district authorizers support higher standards, compared to 18% of district authorizers.

Table 20: AYP and Renewal Criteria

STATEMENT COMPLETION: AUTHORIZER SHOULD SET RENEWAL CRITERIA THAT:	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Are higher than AYP	49	18	32
Are the same as AYP	24	51	39
Could be lower than AYP	11	15	13
Do not use AYP	16	16	16
Total	100	100	100

ONGOING OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION

District and non-district authorizers are similar in the extent to which they monitor a wide range of topics, including student performance on status measures, student academic growth, comparisons to similar schools, AYP, and performance on school-specific measures.

Non-district authorizers are more likely than district authorizers to monitor both fiscal goals and performance toward reporting and compliance goals more than once a year. Sixty-three percent of non-district authorizers report monitoring fiscal goals more than once a year, while 52% of district authorizers report doing so. Performance toward reporting and compliance goals is monitored more frequently than annually by 56% of non-district authorizers and 43% of district authorizers.

As the following two tables show, district authorizers are more likely than non-district authorizers to provide multiple services to charter schools, and are also more likely to report providing a wide range of facilities assistance to schools. As described in Section 3, the legal context of special education delivery and responsibility is prescribed by a charter school's status as either an LEA or a school within a larger LEA. When districts act as authorizers, under most circumstances the resulting schools are legally part of the district's LEA for purposes of special education provision. Schools authorized by non-district authorizers are generally treated as their own LEA for special education provision purposes.

Table 21: Services Provided by Authorizers

SERVICES	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Special education services	23	88	60
Transportation	7	50	31
Financial services	28	70	52
Data analysis	47	81	66
Training on improving instruction	59	88	75
Special education training	62	91	78
Board governance training	62	40	50
Data analysis training	63	84	75
Financial training	64	72	69
Compliance/legal training	61	58	59

Table 22: Facilities Assistance Provided to Schools

FACILITIES-RELATED ASSISTANCE	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Facilities	9	42	27
Assistance in finding facilities	13	53	36
Per-pupil allocation for facilities expenses	7	31	20
Financing for facilities (grants, loans, and guarantees)	9	16	13

When a school performs unsatisfactorily in a specific area, district authorizers are more likely to create a plan for improvement in partnership with the school. Non-district authorizers are more likely to provide the school with a written description of the unsatisfactory performance, require the school to submit a plan for improvement designed by the school, and connect the school with trusted organizations to help address the problem. Non-district authorizers are also more likely than district authorizers to require changes to an underperforming school's board of trustees.

Table 23: School Interventions

ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN SCHOOLS PERFORM UNSATISFACTORILY IN ONE OR MORE AREAS	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Connect the school with organizations trusted to help them address the area(s) of concern	54	29	40
Create a plan for improvement in partnership with the school	29	51	42
Provide the school, in writing, a description of the unsatisfactory performance	92	71	80
Require changes to the school's board of trustees	27	6	15
Require the school to submit a plan for improvement designed by the school and approved by authorizer	88	68	76
Require the school to attend workshops held by authorizer	27	22	24
Deliver support services to the school in the area(s) of concern	50	54	52
Provide the school, in writing, suggestions for how to improve	46	43	44
Connect the school with schools that perform well in the area(s) of concern	31	31	31

RENEWAL DECISION MAKING

In 2008-09, district authorizers reported reviewing a greater percentage of their charter school portfolio (18%) than did non-district authorizers (9%).

District authorizers are more likely than non-district authorizers to decline to renew a charter school. District authorizers declined to renew 16% of their schools up for review while non-district authorizers declined to renew 8% of their schools up for review. Closure rates outside of renewal are nearly identical, and both low, for district and non-district authorizers.

Table 24: School Closure Rate, Within vs. Outside the Renewal Process

SCHOOL CLOSURE RATE	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Outside of renewal	2	1	2
During renewal	8	16	13

AGENCY CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

District and non-district authorizers report different staffing levels both in terms of number of full-time equivalent (FTE) staff assigned exclusively to authorizing work and the number of charter schools per FTE.

Table 25: Staff Assigned to Authorizing Work

STAFFING	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS	OVERALL
Average number of FTE employees assigned exclusively to authorizing work	4.9	1.4	2.9
Average number of schools per FTE	3.8	7.6	5.3

Non-district authorizers are nearly three times as likely as district authorizers to report having a budget dedicated to authorizing activities. Sixty-seven percent of non-district authorizers report having dedicated authorizing budgets, compared to 23% of district authorizers.

District and non-district authorizers are equally likely to use oversight fees deducted from charter school revenues as a source for funding authorizing activities (58% of authorizers of either type). District authorizers report a higher average oversight fee (4%) than do non-district authorizers (2.2%). District authorizers are more likely than non-district authorizers to report their parent organization's regular operating budget as a source of funding for authorizing. Non-district authorizers are more likely to report using state and federal grants to support authorizing activities.

Table 26: Sources of Authorizers' Funding*

SOURCE	NON-DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	DISTRICT AUTHORIZERS (%)	OVERALL (%)
Oversight fees deducted from charter school revenues	58	58	58
State appropriations	27	11	18
Operating budget of parent organization	21	49	37
State and federal grants	23	8	14

* Note: Respondents could select more than one source of funding.

DISCUSSION

There are important similarities and differences between district authorizers and non-district authorizers. In general, district authorizers appear to share values with non-district authorizers about what is important in a charter application or renewal decision, but districts appear to apply fewer resources to authorizing work. District authorizers are much less likely than non-district authorizers to use external panels of experts to review applications. However, district authorizers contract with almost all of their schools and are more likely to include a long list of requirements in their contracts.

District authorizers do not appear as distinct from non-district authorizers in terms of the rates at which they approve applications. However, they do close schools that are up for review more often than non-district authorizers do.

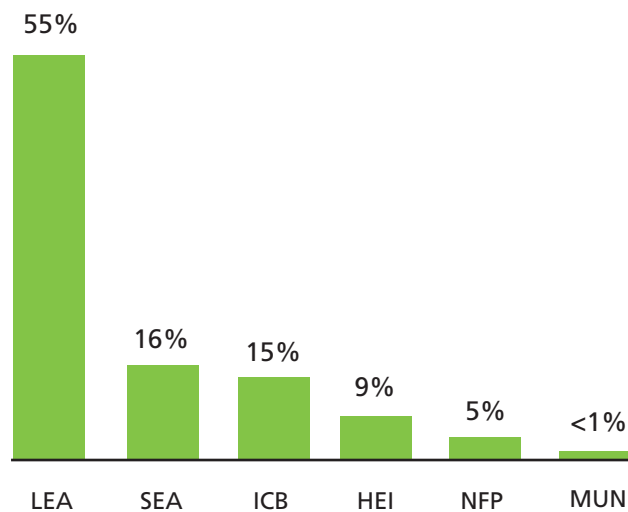
District authorizers, more than non-district authorizers, appear to treat their charter schools more like traditional public schools. Evidence of this includes a higher frequency of district authorizers providing services directly to schools than do non-district authorizers. When schools struggle, district authorizers are more likely to employ interventions that allow themselves to directly shape actions in the school or influence decisions about what should be done to improve the school's operations. They are less likely to support academic standards for charter schools that go beyond state AYP requirements than are non-district authorizers.

The district authorizer practices described above collectively undermine the autonomy of their charter schools. As they do with the non-charter schools they operate directly, district authorizers are less likely than are non-district authorizers to support applying performance standards more rigorous than those required by the state. When a charter school is in trouble, districts appear to feel compelled to help fix it and are also more likely than non-district authorizers to provide either facilities or facilities-related help to their schools.

Section 5: Comparing All Types of Authorizers

This section compares and contrasts responses received from the various types of entities empowered to authorize charter schools. These include school districts, or local education agencies (LEAs); state education agencies (SEAs); higher education institutions (HEIs); non-profit organizations (NFPs); independent chartering boards (ICBs); and mayors/municipalities (MUNs). As discussed in Section 1, LEAs oversee the majority of charter schools in the nation.

Figure 19: Percentage of Charter Schools in the Nation, by Authorizer Type



Authorizer type may significantly impact the context in which charter schools are authorized. Because different types of authorizers face different challenges, we should expect their practices to differ in some respects. Still, many challenges that authorizers face are not unique to type and thus we should expect that authorizers, regardless of type, would employ similar practices to surmount such challenges.

This section outlines similarities and differences in the survey responses of various types of authorizers. Appendix D provides a complete set of data tables comparing their practices.¹⁴ For a description of the distribution of authorizer types in the 2009 survey sample, please refer to Section 1 and Appendix A.¹⁵

APPLICATION PROCESS

The average number of charter school applications received during the 2008-09 school year varied by type of authorizer. HEIs had the largest average number of applications (15.9) and NFPs had the lowest average number (3.8).

Table 27: Application Rates, 2008-09 School Year

AVERAGE NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS PER AUTHORIZER	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA	OVERALL
	15.9	12.0	5.2	7.0	3.8	11.2	7.6

Authorizers of all types were similar in the level of transparency of their application processes, though NFPs were the least likely to report making evaluation criteria available to applicants. Authorizers vary widely by type in their use of external panels of experts to review charter applications, with 100% of responding ICBs reporting their use, compared to only 24% of LEAs doing the same.

Table 28: Characteristics of the Application Process

APPLICATION PROCESS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Authorizer publishes timelines and materials for application submission, review, and approval.	100	100	80	100	64	100	85
Application evaluation criteria are available to applicants.	92	100	92	100	36	92	87
Authorizer uses the same criteria when evaluating all applications.	100	100	94	100	78	100	94
Authorizer uses an external panel of experts to review new charter applications.	50	100	24	50	36	38	35
Authorizer requires interviews and finds them important.	93	80	89	100	100	77	89

Across authorizer types, there were few reported differences in the importance placed on various factors in charter school application evaluation. Authorizers of all types reported the proposed academic program and the financial viability of the charter school's business plan as being among the top considerations when evaluating applications.

Table 29: Average Rated Importance of Application-Related Factors, on a Scale of 1 (Not Important/Not Required) to 5 (Very Important)

AREAS IN APPLICATION EVALUATION	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA	OVERALL
Interview	4.2	4	3.7	4	4.6	3.6	3.9
Likelihood of success of proposed academic program	5	4.6	4.7	5	4.6	4.7	4.7
Evidence of demand	4.3	3.6	4.1	4	4.1	4.2	4.1
Plan for using assessments to measure student progress	4.5	4	4.5	4.5	4.8	4.4	4.5
Composition of proposed governing board	4.4	3.8	4.1	4.5	4.6	4.3	4.2
Facilities plans	4.5	4	4.1	3.5	3.9	3.8	4.1
Organizational structure	4.3	3.8	4	4	4.1	4.2	4.1
Academic success/ financial viability of proposed education service provider	4.8	4.4	4.5	5	4.5	4.6	4.6
Financial viability of the charter school's business plan	4.9	4.8	4.7	5	4.8	4.5	4.7

Application approval rates during the 2008-09 school year ranged from the low end of a 23% average approval rate for MUN authorizers to a high of 48% for NFPs.

Table 30: Application Approval Rate, 2008-09 School Year

	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Average Application Approval Rate	39	32	40	23	48	33	39

PERFORMANCE CONTRACTING

As the following two tables show, SEAs were the least likely to sign contracts with the charter schools they oversee, and the least likely to include many important elements within these contracts. MUNs were less likely than other types of authorizers to report including criteria and processes for intervening in a school's operations.

Table 31: Use of Legal Agreements

AUTHORIZER USES LEGAL AGREEMENTS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
	100	100	98	100	91	77	95

Table 32: Reported Contents of Legal Agreements with Charter Schools

CONTENTS OF CONTRACTS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Performance goals on status assessments	92	100	82	100	100	50	83
Performance goals of student academic measures using growth data	100	100	79	100	91	69	84
Student academic performance on goals compared to other schools	87	83	77	50	73	55	75
School AYP performance	93	83	83	100	90	62	83
Performance goals on evidence-based special measures	93	100	79	100	82	58	80
Performance toward fiscal goals	93	83	83	100	83	75	84
Performance toward organizational goals	87	100	81	100	91	67	83
Performance toward reporting and compliance	100	100	92	100	100	83	93
Waivers from traditional public school laws and regulations	67	100	67	0	82	58	68

Table 32: Reported Contents of Legal Agreements with Charter Schools...continued

CONTENTS OF CONTRACTS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Specific milestones schools must meet prior to opening doors	100	83	80	100	100	67	84
Requirement for a governing board with legally valid bylaws	100	100	95	100	92	75	93
Definition of and procedure for contract amendment and dispute resolution	100	100	90	100	100	75	91
Performance standards that provide the basis for renewal decisions based on state, federal, and charter requirements	100	83	86	100	100	75	89
Expectations for compliance with procedural requirements of relevant federal programs	100	100	93	100	100	75	93
Criteria and processes for intervening in a school's operations	93	100	79	50	80	73	81

ONGOING OVERSIGHT AND EVALUATION

Authorizers vary widely by type regarding the importance they place on Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) when setting renewal criteria. MUNs support renewal criteria that are higher than AYP, while only 18% of the LEAs surveyed reported doing so.

Table 33: Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and Renewal Criteria

STATEMENT COMPLETION: AUTHORIZER SHOULD SET RENEWAL CRITERIA THAT:	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Are higher than AYP	57	50	18	100	36	42	32
Are the same as AYP	21	0	51	0	45	25	39
Could be lower than AYP	14	0	15	0	9	17	13
Do not use AYP	7	50	16	0	9	17	16
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Authorizers of all types report similar rates of monitoring a variety of activities and areas. Student academic performance — whether measured via status assessments, comparisons to other schools, or growth measures — is monitored by authorizers of all types with similar frequency. Fiscal goals are the area most likely to be monitored more frequently than annually, regardless of authorizer type.

Table 34: Performance Toward Fiscal Goals

FREQUENCY	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Not monitored	7	0	8	0	0	0	6
Monitored at renewal	7	0	2	0	0	8	3
Monitored annually	20	40	38	50	8	58	35
Monitored more than annually	67	60	52	50	92	33	57
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

MUNs are less likely than other types of authorizers to provide multiple services to schools.

Table 35: Services Provided to Schools

SERVICES	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Training on improving instruction	67	60	88	0	67	50	75
Data analysis training	85	80	84	50	45	50	75
Data analysis	67	40	81	50	25	45	66
Financial training	71	80	72	0	67	55	69
Financial services	43	20	70	0	17	30	52
Board governance training	71	60	40	0	83	42	50
Compliance/legal training	87	60	58	0	45	55	59
Special education training	64	80	91	0	58	67	78
Special education services	14	20	88	0	27	36	60
Transportation	7	0	50	0	0	18	31

When a school performs unsatisfactorily in an area, MUNs and HEIs are the authorizers most likely to provide the school a written description of the unsatisfactory performance. MUNs are more likely to identify a problem, but report taking few actions to solve the problem directly.

Table 36: School Interventions

ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN SCHOOLS PERFORM UNSATISFACTORILY IN ONE OR MORE AREAS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Provide the school, in writing, a description of the unsatisfactory performance	100	83	71	100	83	92	80
Provide the school, in writing, suggestions for how to improve	53	33	43	0	58	38	44
Create a plan for improvement in partnership with the school	47	0	51	0	25	31	42
Require the school to submit a plan for improvement designed by the school and approved by authorizer	93	67	68	100	92	85	76
Connect the school with schools that perform well in the area(s) of concern	27	33	31	50	50	15	31

Table 36: School Interventions... continued

ACTIONS TAKEN WHEN SCHOOLS PERFORM UNSATISFACTORILY IN ONE OR MORE AREAS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Connect the school with organizations trusted to help them address the area(s) of concern	47	67	29	50	67	46	40
Require the school to attend workshops held by authorizer	13	33	22	0	42	31	24
Deliver support services to the school in the area of concern	60	50	54	0	58	38	52
Require changes to the school's board of trustees	40	33	6	0	17	23	15

RENEWAL DECISION MAKING

During the 2008-09 school year, authorizers varied by type in the percentage of schools in their portfolios that they reviewed for renewal. HEIs reported the highest review rate (20%) and ICBs reported the lowest review rate (<1%).

**Table 37: Percentage of Schools Reviewed for Renewal, 2008-09
School Year**

OVERALL PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOLS REVIEWED FOR RENEWAL	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
	20	<1	18	23	17	10	13

Across all types of authorizers, performance toward goals on student academic measures using growth data and performance toward fiscal goals were among the most important considerations in renewal/revocation decisions.

Table 38: Average Rated Importance of Renewal/Revocation-Related Factors, on a Scale of 1 (Not Important/Not Required) to 5 (Very Important)

AREAS	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA	OVERALL
Results on “point in time”/status assessments	4.1	3.8	3.8	4.0	4.0	4.0	3.9
Performance toward goals on student academic measures using growth data	4.8	4.3	4.5	5.0	4.5	4.2	4.5
Results of student performance compared to other schools	4.5	3.0	4.2	2.5	3.7	4.2	4.1
School AYP performance	4.1	3.0	4.1	3.5	3.9	3.9	4.0
Performance on evidence-based special measures for mission-specific goals	4.3	3.6	4.0	4.5	3.8	3.4	3.9
Performance toward fiscal goals	4.4	4.0	4.4	4.5	4.4	4.4	4.4
Performance toward organizational goals	4.0	3.4	4.0	3.5	4.0	4.1	4.0
Performance toward reporting and compliance requirements	4.1	4.0	4.3	3.0	4.6	4.4	4.3

Table 38: Average Rated Importance of Renewal/Revocation-Related Factors, on a Scale of 1 (Not Important/Not Required) to 5 (Very Important)...continued

AREAS	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA	OVERALL
Responses on parent satisfaction surveys	3.6	2.4	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.1	3.4
Percentage of instructional staff meeting highly qualified teacher requirements in state	4.2	3.2	4.1	3.5	3.7	3.5	3.9
Re-enrollment rate	4.0	3.2	3.6	3.5	3.6	3.1	3.6

AGENCY CAPACITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

ICBs report the highest average number of full-time equivalent (FTE) employees assigned exclusively to authorizing work (9.7). MUNs report the highest number of schools per FTE (9.7).

Table 39: Staff Assigned to Authorizing Work

STAFFING	HEI	ICB	LEA	MUN	NFP	SEA	OVERALL
Average Number of FTE employees assigned exclusively to authorizing work	6.4	9.7	1.4	1.8	3.4	2.5	2.9
Average Number of Schools per FTE	2.7	1.7	7.6	9.7	5.9	9.0	5.3

Among the various types of authorizers, SEAs are the least likely to report relying on oversight fees deducted from charter school revenues to support authorizing activities.

Table 40: Sources of Authorizers' Funding*

SOURCES OF FUNDING	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
Oversight fees	80	67	58	50	67	23	58
State appropriations	20	67	11	0	8	38	18
Operating budget of parent organization	7	17	49	50	25	31	37
State and federal grants	0	33	8	0	0	69	14

* Note: Respondents could select more than one source of funding.

Among those authorizers that rely on oversight fees, a range of fee levels were reported. ICBs reported the lowest average oversight fee (1.6%). LEAs reported the highest average oversight fee (4%).

Table 41: Average Reported Oversight Fee Deducted from Charter School Revenues

AVERAGE OVERSIGHT FEE	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
	2.5	1.6	4.0	2.5	2.2	1.7	3.4

LEAs and SEAs are the authorizer types least likely to report having a budget dedicated to authorizing activities.

Table 42: Percentage of Authorizers with a Dedicated Budget

AUTHORIZERS WITH DEDICATED BUDGETS	HEI (%)	ICB (%)	LEA (%)	MUN (%)	NFP (%)	SEA (%)	OVERALL (%)
	93	100	23	100	50	27	41

DISCUSSION

When all the types of charter authorizers are compared, a few observations become apparent regardless of whether an authorizer oversees a large or small portfolio or operates as a school district.

SEAs appear to be operating in a challenging context and some do not employ recommended practices. SEAs apply very few staff or financial resources to their authorizing functions. They are the entities that are least likely to use contracts with their schools, and are also more likely to value standards of academic performance that are not more rigorous than a school’s AYP status.

If — as was noted in Section 4 — districts treat charters like other district-run schools, some SEAs appear to treat charter authorizing like another state-run education improvement program, without accommodating the unique nature of the work associated with charter school oversight. When authorizing, the SEA must do more for “its” schools while at the same time interact with these schools while using a mindset outside that of their usual compliance framework.

ICBs have some notable problems as well, which is more problematic given the size of some of their portfolios. For example, some ICBs have a great number of schools in their portfolios, but reported reviewing none of their charters for renewal decisions during 2008-09. These review rates can be tied to state laws with longer-than-usual charter terms that are beyond the control of the authorizing entity. As long as closure rates for schools outside the review process remain around 2% annually, authorizers that do not review their schools’ charters for ten or fifteen years are unlikely to purge portfolios of low-performing schools. In the meantime, too many students may spend years attending schools that are not performing at acceptable levels.

As a group, the NFPs appear to have less rigorous application approval processes, as indicated by the relatively high approval rates. Given the changes over time in the approval rates of new charter applications, NFP authorizers appear to be operating about five years behind the times, with approval rates around 50%.

Conclusion

The data gathered from NACSA's 2009 survey of authorizers provides a complex account of the practices of charter school authorizers across the nation and how those practices vary among the different authorizer groups. The similarities among authorizers could indicate a relatively broad and growing consensus regarding appropriate authorizer practices and priorities, at least among large authorizers. The differences between various authorizers' practices, meanwhile, point toward areas where there may be disagreement about how things should be done as well as challenges in implementation. The data reported in the preceding pages suggests many topics for further research.

A minority of authorizers responding to the survey fail to implement practices that could help ensure the quality of the charter schools they oversee. More information is needed to fully understand the circumstances in which these practices are not implemented. Nevertheless, the results of this year's survey reinforce similar findings from the first survey and suggest that a combination of policy changes and technical assistance could help promote practices that should be universally adopted by charter school authorizers.

For example, all charter applicants should be interviewed by authorizers and those interviews should be considered before charters are granted. Based on research into current practices, NACSA has sought to improve practices like these through both technical assistance and changes in policy at the state and federal level. NACSA continues to recommend that:

- All authorizers should ensure the schools they oversee operate under performance contracts that spell out what the school will do, for what it will be held accountable, and autonomies it will enjoy.
- All authorizers should use data from their state accountability systems as the primary measure to evaluate school performance.
- All schools should be required to conduct an annual financial audit and file it with their authorizer.

The data described in this report answer many questions about the practices of charter school authorizers, but many more questions remain. NACSA will continue its research through annual surveys of authorizers and an ongoing effort to update basic information on charter school authorizers. Topics of future data collection and analysis include:

- Clear information on the rates at which authorizers review charter applications, and more details on the reasons for closure and renewal. This analysis should also examine information on the number of charter applications submitted to potential authorizers that have not yet granted a charter.
- More in-depth analysis of areas of authorizer practice that appear to be either surprising or problematic. For example, the topics of interviews, financial audits, and contracts require additional research that examines those authorizer practices in more detail.
- More information on the standards for performance to which authorizers hold their schools. The preliminary information on which authorizers apply standards that are higher than the state's determination of a school's AYP status deserves to be revisited as state and federal accountability systems evolve.
- An investigation of differences in practice between types of authorizers, including a more thorough treatment of the quality of these practices.

In addition to its ongoing efforts to gather annual data on authorizer practice, NACSA plans to pursue additional lines of research including:

- An examination of the role of the various policy and governance structures that affect which entities serve as authorizers and shape how they behave. A more nuanced understanding of the authorizer environments fostered by states will allow NACSA to examine the connections between specific policies and structures, and the practices of authorizers.

- **An analysis of the relationships between charter school authorizer practices and charter school performance.**

NACSA assumes that charter laws matter, that policies and education reform environments matter, and that many factors influence student performance. But we hope to better understand the connections, if they exist, between the practices and actions of charter school authorizers, the quality of the charter schools they oversee, and eventually the learning that takes place within these schools.

In the meantime, the data presented here are offered to further inform those who study or work in the charter school movement. NACSA would like to thank the charter school authorizers across the nation who responded to this year's survey. Their openness and transparency regarding their policies and practices were essential to the production of this report. Transparency and an emphasis on data are not just necessary for a study such as this, but are hallmarks of quality charter school authorizing as well.

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- ¹ Based on NACSA's most recent data linking each charter school to its authorizer.
- ² http://www.qualitycharters.org/files/public/Principles_and_Standards_2009.pdf
- ³ The calculations presented in this section are based on NACSA's most recent data set that links each charter school to its authorizer.
- ⁴ According to data provided by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.
- ⁵ 2007-08 authorizers identified by NACSA; the actual number may be higher.
- ⁶ As of January 2010.
- ⁷ These calculations are based on NACSA's most recent data that links each charter school to its authorizer. Precise figures can depend on the time of reporting. Any minor variation due to reporting is unlikely to change any substantive findings in this report.
- ⁸ [http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/Gau%20Charter%20AuthorizerV2%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/Gau%20Charter%20AuthorizerV2%20(2).pdf)
- ⁹ Application approval rates for "Before 2003" and "In 2005" were reported by The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in their 2005 report, *Trends in Charter School Authorizing*. The application approval rate for the "Largest 50 Authorizers 2005-08" was reported in 2009 by NACSA in their report, *The State of Charter School Authorizing: A Report on NACSA's 2008 Authorizer Survey*. The application approval rate for "Authorizers with 10 or more schools 2008-09" was calculated from responses to NACSA's 2009 survey of authorizers. Some of the variation in application approval rates over time may be due to differences in the authorizers surveyed across the 3 reports.
- ¹⁰ When authorizers reported a range of fees, the average of the minimum and maximum fees reported was calculated.
- ¹¹ http://www.qualitycharters.org/files/public/Authorizer_Funding.pdf
- ¹² Available online at www.qualitycharters.org.
- ¹³ Available online at www.qualitycharters.org.
- ¹⁴ Available online at www.qualitycharters.org.
- ¹⁵ Available online at www.qualitycharters.org.



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