

Community-Based Authorizing: Current and Evolving Strategies

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Community-Based Authorizing

Across the country, over 900 charter school authorizers are responsible for ensuring that schools operating within their portfolios are meeting the needs of students and families in their communities.¹ Whether an authorizer is a school district or a local education agency, a statewide body, a nonprofit, or an institution of higher education, it has the authority to approve new schools or to renew or close existing schools based on its state’s charter laws. In addition, authorizers should make decisions that meet the needs of students and families, which may include their academic and developmental needs but also may go beyond educational needs in order to remove barriers to learning.

Yet, there is debate about the authorizer’s role in assessing community assets and needs and incorporating its findings into its authorizing work. This brief defines community-based authorizing as the intentional solicitation of community input across the charter life cycle and the use of data about community assets and needs to inform authorizing practices and decisions. Although some organizations also cocreate schools with communities, this brief is focused primarily on authorizers that meet the definition provided here.

Several approaches to the work of community-based authorizing are emerging, as this is a new field within the charter sector. The focus of this brief is to look at what strategies authorizers are using currently to implement community-based authorizing, detail some of the main barriers that exist for authorizers, and discuss some solutions to these barriers.

¹ J. White, 2022, *How are charter schools held accountable?* National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, <https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/charter-school-data-digest/who-authorizes-charter-schools/#:~:text=LEAs%20are%20overwhelmingly%20the%20most,number%20of%20schools%20per%20entity>

Definitions of Community

Given that the notion of community is interpreted in various ways, an important first step when embarking on community-based authorizing is to define the community and then identify the community's stakeholders. Authorizers use many definitions of community. They may define their community in terms of a specific geographic radius, such as the neighborhood, district, counties, or state in which they operate. Others may view their community as the schools in their portfolio or as the families and students their schools serve. The definition of community as schools, families, and students may also include different populations, such as school leaders, teachers, potential students and families, or community-based organizations. No single definition applies to all authorizers. Instead, each authorizer determines its own meaning of community based on its own unique context.

A New Focus on Community-Based Authorizing

Within the charter sector, the idea of community-based authorizing may seem like a change from traditional authorizing practices. In the past, authorizers were viewed largely as entities in charge of oversight and compliance for schools in their portfolio. These responsibilities are still an important part of authorizing; authorizers must ensure that the schools they oversee meet all federal and state statutes. At the same time, the nation's priorities have shifted, and the needs of students and families have been brought to the forefront of the education sector by the COVID-19 pandemic, political shifts, and racial reckoning. All communities have untapped assets, and community members have great ideas about how to build on those assets and address their needs.² They have a deep understanding of what their students need and what learning environments will work for them.³ In addition, as the national growth of the charter sector has slowed over the past decade (although growth picked up from 2020 to 2021) and enrollment in many school districts has declined over the last several years, it is more important than ever that new charter schools have a base of support so they will be fully enrolled and supported when they open.⁴

² National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), n.d.-a, *6 guiding principles for charter school authorizing*, https://withcommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NACSA_WithCommunities_CharterSchoolAuthorizingGuide.pdf

³ NACSA, n.d.-a

⁴ D. Veney & D. Jacobs, 2021, *Voting with their feet: A state-level analysis of public charter school and district public school trends*, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2021-09/napcs_voting_feet_rd6.pdf; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, *Public school enrollment, The condition of education 2022*, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2022/cga_508.pdf

Literature on Community-Based Authorizing

Because the field of community-based authorizing is new and evolving, little research exists that provides evidence of what strategies for involving communities are effective. However, most state charter statutes require applicants for new schools to engage the community in some way—whether through public hearings, public comments, market analyses, or other means. Some data exist on how authorizers are incorporating measures of community engagement or input to assess school quality:

- In a recent survey of authorizers that oversee almost two thirds of all charter schools, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) found that 45 percent use findings from teacher and parent surveys, focus groups, or interviews and 28 percent use disaggregated or subgroup measures of student and family engagement and wellness as part of their evaluative processes.⁵
- Similarly, a qualitative analysis of authorizers that achieve strong and moderate outcomes found that the authorizers required applicants to reach out to the community and assess demand by using a variety of vehicles, including “community hearings, surveys, and other sources of evidence of demand presented within the written application.”⁶
- In a recent analysis of new charter applications, NACSA found that 27 percent of applicants indicated a community partnership, and applicants that proposed a community partnership were more likely to be approved than those that did not (44 percent approval rate compared with a 38 percent approval rate for schools with no philanthropic or community support).⁷

The Leaders and Authorizers Who Informed This Brief

WestEd met with eight experienced leaders in the sector (referred to as “leaders” in this brief) who work with charter authorizers or operators and are thinking about and pushing the dialogue about community-based authorizing. These leaders informed our interview protocol and recommended authorizers who were beginning to implement community-based strategies. Based on these recommendations, we selected and interviewed a purposeful sample of staff from 13 authorizers who were engaged in community-based authorizing to some extent. These

⁵ NACSA, n.d.-b, *State of authorizing report*, <https://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/State-of-Authorizing-Report.pdf>

⁶ NACSA, 2018, *Leadership, commitment, judgment: Elements of successful charter school authorizing: Findings from the Quality Practice Project*, p. 18, http://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/LJC_Elements_of_Successful_Charter_School_Authorizing_FINAL_02.27.2018.pdf

⁷ NACSA, 2019, *Reinvigorating the pipeline: Insights into proposed and approved charter schools*, p. 14, https://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Reinvigorating-the-Pipeline_March_2019_FINAL_Web-1.pdf

authorizers included districtwide and statewide entities that represent diverse geographies (12 states), portfolio sizes (7 to 200+ schools), and levels of implementation of community-based strategies. This brief is based primarily on interviews with these individuals from these organizations. We also spoke with staff at two charter school incubator organizations because they are deeply engaged in supporting the development and growth of community-based schools.

Appendix A provides more detail about these interviewees.

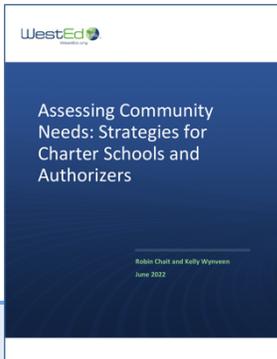
Strategies for Community-Based Authorizing

The Role of the Authorizer in Community-Based Authorizing

An important first step in the work of community-based authorizing is to determine the roles and responsibilities of the authorizer, school operator, and other partner organizations. Based on the interviews we conducted, some authorizers view their role as engaging with the community and assessing community assets and needs. This process may include conducting a formal community needs assessment and using the data to inform a request for new applications or authorizing decisions. Other authorizers view their role as being more indirect, requiring school operators to engage with the community as part of new application, renewal, and other oversight processes.

Several authorizers articulated the relationship between the authorizer and the school operator. Some authorizers thought their role is to conduct their own broad assessment of community needs and require schools to obtain more detailed information about the community they intend to serve or are currently serving. Other authorizers thought their role is to support the schools in doing this work—the authorizer may not have the capacity to do the work, and the schools are the entities that (should) have authentic relationships with their communities.

Leaders shared that schools should be required to demonstrate current and significant student demand in their applications. Several interviewees also thought that authorizers should include guidelines or requirements that reflect community needs in requests for new applications or should ensure that authorizing decisions reflect community needs.



For a step-by-step guide on how school operators or authorizers can assess community needs, see WestEd's brief [Assessing Community Needs: Strategies for Charter Schools and Authorizers](#).

Strategies for Collecting Community Input

The authorizers' differing perspectives on their roles were reflected in the strategies they used for collecting community input. Some of these strategies were relatively straightforward and easy to implement, while others were more complex. In addition, some strategies were used by authorizers, whereas others were authorizer requirements for charter schools and charter school applicants. The most commonly used strategies included holding public hearings, conducting surveys, and requiring applicants to respond to application questions about how they engaged the community or sought community input.

Although typically public hearings are a statutory requirement and sometimes are seen as a compliance activity, some authorizers are finding ways to use them to engage more meaningfully, such as by holding them virtually and requiring applicants to conduct targeted outreach to their communities and invite them to attend. Other commonly used strategies are to hold community stakeholder meetings or focus groups.

Figure 1 shows the continuum of community-based authorizing strategies described by the interviewees, from easiest to hardest to implement: public hearings, application requirements, community stakeholder meetings and focus groups, advisory councils, community surveys, and partnerships with community-based organizations.

Figure 1: Continuum of Community-Based Authorizing Strategies Based on Effort

Public Hearings

Several authorizers interviewed use public hearings as a strategy for gathering community input before making authorizing decisions. During their process of reviewing new school applications or during the renewal process, many authorizers offer a public comment period. Or, more regularly, they provide a public comment period during board meetings throughout the year. Some authorizers have taken steps to facilitate more engagement during public comment periods. For example, the DC Public Charter School Board (DC PCSB) in Washington, DC, revised its public comment process to include three ways in which the public can share input about an item. These include sending written comments, testifying at the meeting, or leaving a voice message. Additionally, the public comment period is the first item on every meeting agenda.

Application Requirements

For the majority of the authorizers interviewed, requiring applicants to write about their efforts for engaging the community is a common strategy. Applications often include a section in which applicants must demonstrate community support and show evidence of their efforts to garner significant community input. The evidence provided may include letters of support from community organizations, intent-to-enroll forms, or a description of how an applicant will incorporate feedback from interested parties in the community once the school opens. For example, the Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA) includes several questions in its application for a new school related to how the applicant worked with the community it intends to serve, including a section that states the following:

Describe the role to date of parents and community members in the development of this application. What specific strategies have been implemented to engage parents and community members? Provide specific examples of how input from parents, neighborhoods, and community members has impacted the application.⁸

Community Stakeholder Meetings and Focus Groups

Another frequently cited strategy is holding community or stakeholder meetings or focus groups. Kathryn Connell-Espinosa from the State University of New York (SUNY) explained that focus groups are effective because they enable the authorizer to get direct responses from members of the community. SUNY provides a set of guidelines for the parents who should participate in the focus groups—including demographics, grade levels, and student performance. John Norman, chief strategy officer in San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD), shared that the district holds community meetings to gather feedback about what families and students want in schools. They also meet with recent alumni to ask them what they liked and did not like about their educational experience.

Advisory Councils

Authorizers recognized the effectiveness of having an advisory council comprising a variety of different interested parties. Albuquerque Public Schools has created an advisory group, which includes students, CEOs, legislators, and other stakeholders, to advise the district on issues and offerings related to school choice. The district has extended an invitation to anyone in the community who wants to join the group. In Nevada, the SPCSA has a community working group that meets quarterly to collaborate in brainstorming strategies and vetting ideas, such as revisions to its strategic plan. Currently, many of this group's members represent community organizations that support students in different ways, such as local child-welfare agencies, economic development organizations, and local municipalities.

Community Surveys

Another effective strategy authorizers mentioned is conducting surveys to gather community input. The authorizing office within Denver Public Schools implements a survey called the New Quality Schools Community Meeting-Feedback Survey, which asks for input on proposed new schools, the schools' plans for engaging communities, and their benefits and challenges. Chicago Public Schools implements the UChicago Impact 5Essentials survey so that the district and all schools can obtain input on how schools are performing in five key areas: supportive environment, ambitious instruction, collaborative teachers, effective leaders, and involved

⁸ Nevada State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA), 2022a, *Call for quality charter schools: Application template*, p. 12. Available at https://charterschools.nv.gov/OpenASchool/Application_Packet/

families. The survey provides a vehicle for informing the school community about their children's schools.

Partnerships With Community-Based Organizations

One strategy that authorizers found to be effective was partnering with political or community-based organizations to seek input from the organizations' constituencies. For example, DC PCSB engages a variety of community partners to host meetings, including education organizations, advisory neighborhood commissions, faith groups, civic associations, and ward education councils. Kathryn Mullen Upton from the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in Ohio shared that foundation staff attend every charter school board meeting, which is possible based on the size of the foundation's portfolio. She also shared the value of "getting to know the individuals and organizations at the core in each community . . . the folks in the community that are already supporting parents." These core organizations can be the YMCA, a faith-based organization, or a college—they are different in every community. The Indianapolis Office of the Mayor leverages the Mayor's Neighborhood Advocates team, whose members attend regional community meetings. This team is an existing service that the mayor's office has been able to leverage to get input from particular neighborhoods.

Strategies for Hearing From All Communities

In addition to using strategies for collecting community input, the authorizers also indicated that they use strategies to ensure they are hearing from and elevating the voices of all relevant populations, including historically underrepresented voices as defined in their own communities. Doing so is accomplished with three main strategies: conducting intentional outreach, engaging with partner organizations, and being flexible about meeting times and locations.

Intentional Outreach

The most commonly used strategy to reach a broad group of interested parties is conducting intentional outreach to specific populations. This outreach includes speaking with community members at specific places or organizations in the community that serve a particular population or being intentional about inviting specific people to meetings in addition to sending out general invitations. Denver Public Schools implemented this strategy by identifying the top three languages in their community, translating and posting information about community meetings on their website, and providing interpreters for the meetings. Chicago Public Schools has a dedicated inbox for community members to provide comments related to public hearings. District staff review all comments. Frequently, many people express the same points of view in their emails, but the district follows up with people who share unique points of view.

Engagement With Partner Organizations

Another common strategy that authorizers use is engaging partner organizations in order to reach relevant communities and working to build relationships with communities over time. The Fordham Foundation's Kathryn Mullen Upton shared that one strategy for leveraging partner organizations was networking with board members who have deep connections to community organizations. Rebecca Feiden shared that Nevada's SPCSA also leverages many community organizations by inviting representatives who work with students in foster care or with disabilities to join its community working group.

Convenient Meeting Times and Locations

Finally, it was clear that authorizers have found that ensuring meeting times and locations are convenient for participants, such as by moving meetings to a virtual platform, has helped meet the needs of participants. Several authorizers continued to hold meetings virtually after it was no longer necessary because of the pandemic because they found that there was better attendance at virtual meetings. SUNY holds monthly webinars with the Northeast Charter Schools Network that include charter authorizers and operators. During the webinars, SUNY shares compliance updates and trends, and other authorizers and charter operators can raise issues and share highlights. The webinars allow SUNY to hear from a broad group of schools and authorizers.

Using Community Input to Inform Authorizing

Once authorizers engage the community and seek their input, there are several ways they use that input as part of the authorizing process. Many authorizers have a legislative mandate to incorporate community input into their authorizing process; however, what authorizers do with the information varies widely. A few states have legislation that provides detail about what authorizers should do with community input, but this is not the norm for most authorizers nationwide. Although some of the strategies described in this section for using community input are not new, they have not always been widely used. In addition, if they were used, many were used for compliance purposes and not to ensure that community input informed high-stake decisions.

Among the authorizers interviewed, community engagement and input tend to have greater weight in new school authorization decisions than they do in renewal or other oversight processes. As public school enrollment has declined in many communities and many communities also face political contexts that are challenging for charter schools, demonstrating a specific community need and robust community support is often necessary for a new school to be authorized. While community input is often a factor evaluated during the renewal process, it was less clear among authorizers how that input informs decisions. However, it does

seem likely that when a school is being considered for closure, community support would be a mitigating factor against a closure decision.

A Unique Strategy

Colorado Charter School Institute: Individualized Support

Recently the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI) worked closely with two operators who were looking to open schools in their state. In order to focus on the operators' needs and the needs of the communities they would be serving, CSI rethought how it could revise its traditional authorizing practices. One of the schools, Kwiyaqat Community Academy, is a new school in CSI's portfolio, located in southwest Colorado and the first Colorado charter school on an Indian reservation. Staff at CSI dedicated time to building a relationship with the school's founding leaders and the leaders of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe during what they called "year 0" of the school's application cycle. The other school, Prospect Academy, is a school whose mission is to provide a safe, inclusive learning environment for students with behavioral and learning challenges. Again, CSI dedicated staff time to provide this applicant with individualized support, working through many logistical and legal challenges regarding how to access funding for the school's proposed student population. By receiving individualized support and listening to the communities their schools hoped to serve, both schools have successfully opened.

Application Process

The most common strategy for incorporating community input into authorizing practices is to require new applicants to engage the community or seek community input, typically by including questions in the new school application or the capacity interview and using a rubric to evaluate answers. Several authorizers were working to make these application questions more rigorous rather than just a compliance exercise.

For example, the Colorado Charter School Institute asks applicants to "describe the ways in which stakeholders in the intended community were engaged regarding the proposed charter school."⁹ Applicants are asked to provide specific information, such as "the method and nature of feedback received from community stakeholders and the process for considering that feedback when developing the application" and "the extent to which the proposal incorporates community input regarding the educational and programmatic needs of students."¹⁰ CSI then rates the responses with an aligned rubric. Similarly, the SPCSA evaluates school applicants

⁹ Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI), 2021, *CSI new school application template*, p. 12. Available at <https://www.csi.state.co.us/applicants/new/>

¹⁰ CSI, 2021, p. 12.

based on “intentional and thoughtful strategies for engaging with community members, families, and parents representative of the community to be served.” In addition, the application must “illustrate, with examples, that parents, neighborhood, and community members representative of the community to be served helped shape the school proposal.”¹¹ Finally, Max Tweten and Omotayo Adeeko of Denver Public Schools shared that applicants are required to “make a compelling argument about the feedback they have received from the community and the changes they have made as a result.”

Several authorizers also shared that their requests for applications provide information about community demographics and needs that applicants are either required or encouraged to respond to for a greater likelihood of being authorized. In 2021, Cleveland Metropolitan School District analyzed performance and enrollment for both charter and traditional schools as part of an update to the district’s strategic plan, the Cleveland Plan. All new charter applicants must review the district’s analysis and explain how they will address the needs identified in the plan. In Nevada, legislation passed in 2019 that requires the SPCSA to conduct a needs assessment and approve only applicants that will address one or more of the needs identified in the assessment.

Another common strategy is to require applicants to provide information about community partners. For example, Denver Public Schools requires applicants to provide evidence of confirmed partnerships and specifically asks new school applicants to “describe any partnerships the school will have with community organizations, businesses, or other educational institutions to support families and students.”¹² The Indianapolis Office of the Mayor requires schools to submit letters of support that demonstrate partnerships with organizations, and it has found that requiring applicants to engage the community on the front end has supported both local and out-of-state applicants.

Renewal Process

Authorizers also frequently use community input in the renewal process. This input is often collected through family and community surveys, public comments, and site visits that sometimes include focus groups. For example, Chicago Public Schools developed a community survey to collect information about why families chose their schools. This information is incorporated into the narrative renewal report, which includes a recommendation for renewal or nonrenewal. Minnesota’s Osprey Wilds does a site visit as part of the renewal process. These

¹¹ SPCSA, 2022b, *Call for quality charter schools: Evaluation rubric*, p. 9.
<https://charterschools.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/CharterSchoolsnvgov/content/OpenASchool/221205-2023-New-Charter-Application-Rubric-FINAL.pdf>

¹² Denver Public Schools, 2022, *2022 new quality school application*, p. 27.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kkXDTOFPuaT-Jbh_qtPtiSorPmoUNCqNv878tVLcclY/edit#

visits include parent and family interviews, and interpreters are provided for families if needed. Osprey Wilds also created family surveys that schools send out as part of the renewal process.

In addition to using these common strategies, some authorizers have implemented unique strategies as part of the renewal process. Albuquerque Public Schools has begun asking each renewing school for a list of 20 community supporters, including vendors or organizations that support the school through grants. The district reaches out to these supporters via text to get their feedback on the school. Chicago Public Schools presents jointly to the public with the school on the “state of the school.” The district invites parents and community members to the presentation and provides the school with a template to talk about its performance. Similarly, SAISD has begun requiring each school undergoing renewal to hold a parent meeting in which the school presents its performance on its goals. Part of this meeting is focused more generally on what about the school is working and what is not working for the community.

Other Oversight

Several authorizers assess community input as part of other oversight processes, such as annual reviews. The Indianapolis Office of the Mayor conducts site visits as part of a performance framework. During this process, it asks external evaluators to assess whether the community understands the school’s mission and whether the school is meeting the needs of the community. Cleveland Metropolitan School District conducts annual focus groups with teachers, parents, and students at the schools it authorizes. The district’s school quality review team designed a focus group protocol that addresses topics such as rigor, safety, and diversity. Osprey Wilds has an evidence-of-demand requirement for charter school expansion requests that is similar to what it requires for new school applicants. The evidence of demand can include “letters/emails of support from parents and community organizations, survey information that includes a sample survey and survey results, and/or sign-in sheets from community information sessions.”¹³

¹³ Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center, 2020, *Expansion application guide*, p. 9. Available at <https://ospreywilds.org/charter-school-division/csd-resources-for-schools/> by clicking on the link “Grade Level, Site, and/or Early Learning Program Expansions.”

A Unique Strategy

Osprey Wilds: Leadership Fellowship

Osprey Wilds has created a paid fellowship to develop more charter school leaders of color. The fellow is a paid staff member who does authorizing work and trains to be a charter school leader at the same time. Erin Anderson of Osprey Wilds shared that a lot of the work of authorizing can help someone develop the capacity to lead a charter school. For example, observing a number of schools helps the fellow assess what is working, what is not, and what the needs of a school are.

Innovative Ideas From Incubators

As part of WestEd’s research, we spoke to staff from CityBridge Education, a charter school incubator in Washington, DC, and the Charter School Growth Fund, an organization that invests in the growth of high-quality charter schools. While most authorizers do not have the capacity to implement the kinds of strategies these organizations use, authorizers may be able to implement aspects of the strategies or be inspired to implement strategies that accomplish similar ends.

CityBridge requires potential operators to codesign new schools with community members. CityBridge invests in these schools in three to four stages, each of which includes a community engagement aspect. As part of stage one, when potential founders have an idea and a problem they intend to solve, their team must conduct empathy interviews with stakeholders in the communities they intend to serve in order to better understand the problem and get input on their idea. This process requires about 50 to 75 conversations, usually with a mix of government leaders, parent council members, and community members. CityBridge also asks founders to conduct several interviews with their most marginalized stakeholders, such as a student or parent who the founders have had a hard time engaging. In stage two, CityBridge provides a fellowship program that supports potential founders in building out a theory of change and conducting pilot programs.

Both of these stages require potential founders to engage in a variety of activities to assess community needs. CityBridge doesn’t prescribe specific activities but founders have, in addition to piloting school programs, conducted focus groups, analyzed feeder patterns, built partnerships, and engaged in many conversations with people in their communities. Part of the goal of these early stages is for potential founders to really understand whether and why their school is needed.

The Charter School Growth Fund supports both the early-stage development of charter schools (mostly for schools that have been authorized) and the scaling of charter networks. As part of its due diligence when deciding which investments to make, it asks schools how they have assessed community needs. It also relies on geographically based team members and local

fundors to assess a school’s connection to the community. For founders that are in the early stage of seeking to open a school, the Growth Fund considers whether the founders are originally or currently rooted in the community in which they are hoping to open a school. As part of the Growth Fund’s support for schools that are intending to expand, it analyzes the school’s strengths and areas of growth in order to identify areas for support. For example, it might pair a school with an executive coach or support a school in developing and executing the school’s facility strategy. Soenda Howell, partner at the Charter School Growth Fund told WestEd that “[the Growth Fund’s] goal is to provide catalytic support for strong starts and openings and is responsive to the organizations’ needs. We continue to expand the suite of supports that we provide to school networks.”

Barriers to and Solutions for Community-Based Authorizing

Authorizers across the country have found effective ways to gather community input and use the information in their authorizing practices. However, many have found this work difficult for a variety of reasons. Charter statutes vary by state; the type, size, and number of authorizers per state varies widely; and the relationships authorizers have with their communities or how they are perceived by their communities may change over time. The authorizers interviewed indicated several common barriers they face when approaching community-based authorizing, as well as some potential solutions for overcoming these barriers. These barriers and solutions are outlined in this section.

One strategy authorizers suggested that would address many of the barriers identified is to leverage community ambassadors or staff from community-based organizations who are deeply embedded in the community to help with engaging community members and collecting their feedback. Max Tweten from Denver Public Schools suggested that community ambassadors could be pastors, staff from community centers, or coaches—people who have strong relationships with and are trusted by people in the community. Leaders suggested that developing case studies or examples of how to engage in community-based authorizing would be helpful and that these examples would likely help authorizers think about how to address many barriers.

1: Mindset Shift and Role of the Authorizer

Many of the authorizers and leaders described the need for authorizing staff and school operators to shift their thinking in order to do the work of community-based authorizing. They referenced authorizing staff who do not understand community engagement or who do not think community engagement should be part of authorizing, whether it's done by the school or the authorizer directly. Some authorizers acknowledged that their state statute includes requirements for community engagement but did not see their role as doing any more than fulfilling those requirements. Rebecca Feiden of the SPCSA shared,

Many authorizers acknowledge what is in statute related to community engagement requirements. But due to a variety of factors, such as authorizer capacity, respect for a school's autonomy, and the importance of relationships between school staff and the community, [authorizers are not able to] dedicate significant time to ensure that applicants understand the need for them to conduct community engagement during the charter authorization process.

In addition, charter operators throughout the country do not always believe community input should inform how schools are evaluated. The SPCSA shared that it was important to help charter operators understand the need to engage the community on the front end because once a school opens that is not serving the community well, it is much harder for it to change course.

Authorizers also expressed a barrier related to their role and how it affects their relationship with the community. Several authorizers expressed that the majority of the public does not understand what an authorizer is or what it does. Typically the authorizer has a relationship with the school, and the school has a relationship with the community. Therefore, the authorizer can be seen as a middleman, and the community can be reluctant to engage in meetings, surveys, or other engagement efforts the authorizer leads. John Norman at the SAISD shared,

When you talk to parents, they either don't understand the difference between charters and districts or they don't really care. They focus more on things like the quality of the teaching, what programs are being offered, what the school culture is like, and whether the school schedule meets their needs. Concepts like charter schools, autonomy, and accountability aren't their primary focus.

To address these barriers, authorizers shared the need for capacity building among their staff in order to help them understand their communities and support authentic relationship building with community members. Whether the authorizer directly engages with its community or provides requirements and supports for the operator to do so, based on discussions with interviewees it is clear that ensuring there is a robust role for community engagement and being clear about the roles of the authorizer and the operator are important.

Leaders suggested providing authorizers with a self-evaluation tool to help them understand their role in engaging the community and what next steps are appropriate for them in their contexts. For some authorizers, hosting meetings at a school site or in partnership with a school also may improve the public's understanding of their role. Osprey Wilds noted that since 2020 its office has transitioned toward a relationship-based authorizing approach and away from a strictly compliance-based approach with their schools and with the communities their schools serve. This approach includes meeting with every school leader to review the charter contract and point out what often get missed. It also includes sitting and talking with students during lunchtime at renewal visits. Staff from Osprey Wilds also ask schools what questions the staff should ask of families during their school site visits.

2: Proximity of the Authorizer

For statewide authorizers in particular, engaging with all communities in which they have schools or in which schools might be needed is not feasible. Although these authorizers support the idea of engaging their communities, their distance from many of their schools makes it difficult to have a true understanding of all of the communities they serve, to understand which community partners and organizations are integral to the community, and to build authentic relationships. Thus, authorizers are looking for ways to bridge the geographical divides in their states. Several authorizers shared that they had started hiring authorizing staff in different locations in order to cover more geographic ground. For example, the CSI recently began hiring staff outside of Denver because the schools in their portfolio and new applicants are located elsewhere in the state. Ryan Marks explained, "We're diversifying where we hire from and where our staff lives. Staff can become more of a voice of the community." A solution shared by SUNY is to communicate with different interested parties in a variety of ways, such as through their website, a newsletter, and monthly webinars.

3: Resources and Capacity

Both authorizers and staff from charter support organizations believed that many authorizers lack the resources and capacity to engage the community. Leaders expressed that this is a barrier for charter operators as well. Several authorizers explained that they lacked the staff, time, resources, or expertise to engage communities and build relationships. Many authorizers are operating with a small team, sometimes as small as two staff members, which makes it difficult to be in a community physically. Other authorizers may be operating on a tight budget without the flexibility to try new and innovative approaches to engaging with their communities.

A primary strategy for addressing this challenge is to partner with and leverage local organizations in order to engage community members and share information about community assets and needs. Another strategy mentioned by several authorizers and leaders is to ensure

schools have a board member or two with strong ties to the community in order to gain their perspective and voice regarding decisions about the school. Idaho's Bluum, Inc., shared that in many cases neither authorizers nor operators have the capacity to assess community needs and that a potential solution to this barrier is to engage a third party in this work.

Authorizers and leaders shared that it would be helpful to have survey instruments and tools, such as protocols for focus groups or site visits, to use for collecting community input. Several authorizers shared that they would like to have a position in their organization that focused solely on community engagement. Similarly, leaders shared that being able to conduct a variety of community engagement activities and having differentiated tools for assessing community demand and needs would be helpful. These tools should share strategies, such as showing what good community outreach looks like and how to hold an effective community meeting, that authorizers could use in different contexts. Finally, district authorizers shared the idea of leveraging staff from other offices that are already doing community engagement work and using surveys and engagement activities conducted by other offices within the district.

4: Political Environment

Several authorizers and a couple of leaders shared that the political environment they are in makes it difficult to open new charter schools, particularly as enrollment has been declining in traditional public schools. Therefore policymakers are not inclined to conduct outreach to community members about new school applications. Although authorizers did not share many ideas for addressing the barrier of a difficult political environment, several shared that providing evidence of community support for a charter school helps build political support. Because of declining enrollment and political opposition, there is a high bar for authorizing new schools, and evidence of community support helped meet this bar.

5: Authorizer Perception of Risk and Metrics of Quality

A couple of authorizers and leaders shared that authorizer perception of risk and related metrics of quality is a barrier to engaging in community-based authorizing. Several interviewees suggested that traditional metrics of quality may not capture the contributions of innovative, community-based models. In addition, new operators with stronger ties to the community may not have proven educational models or investments in building their capacity. Jana Wilcox Lavin from Opportunity 180 in Nevada shared, "How do we assess what a charter school can provide in this community, and what does that say about the strategy we might deploy?" Others were concerned that it is important to balance these contributions against traditional tenets of authorizing and measures of rigor and quality.

A potential solution to these challenges is to begin to value some of the assets a community-driven approach might offer. Another solution offered by incubator organizations is to build the

capacity of community-driven charter operators and prepare them to successfully open a new school.

Conclusion

According to many of the authorizers interviewed for this brief, engaging in community-based authorizing is not always easy, and it is dependent on the size, type, location, and capacity of the authorizing unit, among many other factors. Although this work is hard, many authorizers across the country are engaging in this work, developing new strategies for doing so, and perceiving benefits to students and families. Taking the time to hear from students, families, and community members about what they hope for or what they can bring to new school development potentially can result in schools that are fully enrolled and fully embraced by the community and that provide a high-quality education. There is a continuum of strategies to engage in community-based authorizing, ranging from low-effort strategies like holding open public comment periods to high-effort strategies such as conducting a statewide needs assessment.

These interviews with authorizers and leaders also raised several outstanding questions that will need to be addressed as authorizers grapple with how to implement community-based authorizing:

- What if the community voices conflict? How are decisions determined when competing interests are involved?
- What if the majority of the community does not represent the interests of a smaller population that has a greater need for a new school? How do you elevate voices that historically have had the least access to the authorizing process? How does the public good affect authorizing decisions if community input conflicts with the public good?
- What if a charter school has demonstrated strong past performance, meets enrollment targets, and has wait-lists at some locations but is not engaging the community before requesting to expand or open a new school? Should an authorizer deny this type of applicant?
- How should authorizers address the tension between independent, community-centered schools and models with a track record of high performance?
- How can the community be engaged and asked to take time to provide input when it may not be possible to commit to following through and opening the schools they seek in ways that seem timely and responsive?

There are no clear and easy answers to these questions, just as there is no one right approach to this work. Nonetheless, overall there are a variety of promising and appropriate strategies, depending on the authorizers' contexts. Hopefully authorizers interested in engaging in this work can use what they learn from this brief to take the next step in implementing community-based authorizing by identifying one or two additional strategies that might work in their contexts.

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Appendix A: Methodology

How Leader Interviewees Were Selected

Based on research WestEd conducted and conversations with WestEd internal staff, a list of leaders was developed, comprising professionals who WestEd knew were engaged in the work of community-based authorizing.

Leader Interviewees

- Katie Dammann Burke, Senior Director, Policy, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
- Amanda Fenton, Partner, Capitol Advocacy Partners
- David Greenberg, Vice President, Authorizer Learning and Development, National Association of Charter School Authorizers
- Alex Medler, Executive Director, National Network for District Authorizing
- Naomi Rubin DeVeaux, Partner, National Charter Schools Institute
- Terry Ryan, CEO, Bluum, Inc.
- Heather Wendling, Project Director, NY-RISE WestEd
- Jana Wilcox Lavin, CEO, Opportunity 180
- Christy Wolfe, Senior Vice President, Policy, Research, Planning, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

How Authorizer Interviewees Were Selected

All interviewees from authorizing organizations were selected based on the recommendations of the leaders when those leaders were asked about who has started thinking about or implementing community-based authorizing.

Authorizer Interviewees

- Omotayo Adeeko, Director of Authorizing and Accountability, Denver Public Schools
- Erin Anderson, Director of Charter School Authorizing, Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center
- Kathryn Connell-Espinosa, Interim Executive Director, SUNY Charter Schools Institute
- Joseph Escobedo, Senior Director of Charter Schools, Albuquerque Public Schools
- Zabrina Evans, Director of School Quality and Support, Chicago Public Schools
- Rebecca Feiden, Executive Director, Nevada State Public Charter School Authority
- John Carlos Green, Community Engagement Manager, DC Public Charter School Board
- Ryan Marks, Chief of Authorizing and Accountability, Colorado Charter School Institute
- Aerionna Martin, formerly Assistant Director of Strategic Planning, Office of Education Innovation, Indianapolis Office of the Mayor
- Sam Mathias, Director of School Development, Chicago Public Schools
- Mark Modrcin, Director of Authorizing, Nevada State Public Charter School Authority
- Kathryn Mullen Upton, Vice President for Sponsorship, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
- John Norman, Chief Strategy Officer, San Antonio Independent School District
- Matt Rado, Executive Director, Charter Schools, Cleveland Metropolitan School District
- Theda Sampson, Director for Applications and Contracts, Thomas B. Fordham Foundation
- Max Tweten, Senior Authorizing Specialist, Authorizing and Accountability, Denver Public Schools
- Matthew Underwood, Executive Director, Office of Charter and Partner Schools, Atlanta Public Schools
- Rochelle Washington, Director of Performance and Accountability, Chicago Public Schools

Incubator Interviewees

- Meghan Grady Serrano, Associate Director of Schools and Program Strategy, CityBridge Education
- Soenda Howell, Partner, Charter School Growth Fund
- Jim Kline, formerly Senior Director of Program Strategy, CityBridge Education

Information About the Authorizers Interviewed

Table 1. Authorizers Interviewed, Location, Type, and Size of Portfolio

Interviewee	Location	Type of authorizer	Size of portfolio (2021/22)
Albuquerque Public Schools	Albuquerque, New Mexico	District authorizer	32 schools
Atlanta Public Schools	Atlanta, Georgia	District authorizer	25 charter and partner schools
Chicago Public Schools	Chicago, Illinois	District authorizer	129 schools
Cleveland Metropolitan School District	Cleveland, Ohio	District authorizer	7 schools
Colorado Charter School Institute	Denver, Colorado	Statewide authorizer	42 schools
DC Public Charter School Board	Washington, DC	Independent government agency	135 schools
Denver Public Schools	Denver, Colorado	District authorizer	56 schools
Indianapolis Office of the Mayor	Indianapolis, Indiana	Mayor-sponsored authorizer	47 schools
Nevada State Public Charter School Authority	Carson City, Nevada	Statewide authorizer	78 charter school campuses
Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center	Sandstone, Minnesota	Nonprofit statewide authorizer	39 schools
San Antonio Independent School District	San Antonio, Texas	District authorizer	90 schools, 33 are in-district charter schools

Interviewee	Location	Type of authorizer	Size of portfolio (2021/22)
SUNY Charter Schools Institute	Albany, New York	Statewide authorizer	221 schools
Thomas B. Fordham Foundation	Columbus, Ohio	Nonprofit statewide authorizer	13 schools

Appendix B: Resources for Community-Based Authorizing

New School Application Resources

- [Application Kit for Community Schools, 2019–20, Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#)
- [Reviewer Kit for Charter School Applications, 2019–20, Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#)
- [Call for Quality Charter Schools Application Template, Nevada State Public Charter School Authority](#)
- [Call for Quality Charter Schools Evaluation Rubric, Nevada State Public Charter School Authority](#)
- [Request for Proposals to Authorize New Charter Schools, 2022, SUNY Charter Schools Institute](#)
- [CSI New School Application Template, 2021, Colorado Charter School Institute](#)
- [CSI New School Application Rubric, 2021, Colorado Charter School Institute](#)
- [Thomas B. Fordham Foundation New School Charter Application, 2022](#)
- [Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Charter School Application Evaluation Rubric, 2021](#)

Renewal Resources

- [Charter Renewal Application, 2020–21, Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#)
- [Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Charter School Renewal Application, 2019](#)
- [Thomas B. Fordham Foundation Charter School Renewal Evaluation Rubric and Process, 2019](#)

Other Resources

- [The Refreshed Cleveland Plan, 2023, Cleveland Metropolitan School District](#)
- [2023 Academic and Demographic Needs Assessment, 2022, Nevada State Public Charter School Authority](#)
- [CSI Market Analyses, Colorado Charter School Institute](#)

