



NACSA Notes

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This issue of *NACSA Notes* reports on the following topics:

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The State's Role in Charter School Accountability

As the number of charter schools has continued to grow nationwide, there has been an increasing tendency for states to allow multiple types of entities to grant and oversee charter schools. Despite this distribution of charter authorizing duties among separate and independent entities, states continue to play a prominent role in a given state's charter school program. A recent [report](#) issued by the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) provides an analysis of the ways in which states are working to promote charter schools flexibility while maintaining effective accountability. Surveying all 39 state education agencies (SEAs) (including the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico) with operating charter schools in the 2002-2003 school year, the GAO explored four key questions: 1) how states allow flexibility for charter schools; 2) how states promote accountability for charter schools; 3) what implications the No Child Left Behind Act has for charter schools; and 4) what role the U.S. Department of Education plays in charter school accountability.

The report offers an interesting snapshot of the types of authorizers operating in each state as well as the level of oversight and support they receive from the state. It shows that in a majority of states where charter schools exist, one or more entities have charter authorizing privileges. According to a survey of SEAs, about half of the 39 charter states allow more than one type of authorizer. And in nearly three quarters of the 39 states, an entity other than a local education agency (LEA) can have authorizing powers.

A significant number of the states reported involvement in charter school accountability. Roughly half cited primary responsibility for enforcing school improvement plans in charter schools not meeting NCLB standards. When asked to identify the entities responsible for financial oversight of charter schools, the states cited authorizers most often, but more than half felt that this is an obligation of the SEA as well. With regards to their oversight of charter authorizers, most states reported taking actions to identify and address any problems with authorizer oversight of schools. In most of the 29 states where authorizers other than the SEA exist, the state reports that it assists and monitors authorizing bodies in one or more capacities. States describe the "assistance" they provide authorizers in helping them oversee charter schools as falling into four

broad categories: direct funding, allowing authorizers to collect fees from the schools they charter, training, and technical assistance (See [Table 4](#)).

While the GAO report indicates substantial state involvement in charter authorizing practices, the relationship between authorizer and state is not always clearly defined. According to NACSA's recent "[Leading Indicators](#)" survey of authorizers and SEAs on NCLB and charter authorizing, many authorizers are still trying to understand their role with NCLB and how it should be evaluated by the state.

Statewide Charter Authorizing Collaborations

As recognized by the GAO report mentioned above, there is a tendency for states to allow multiple types of entities to approve and oversee charter schools. In many cases, authorizers and their states have joined forces to ensure that in the wake of this formal decentralization of chartering duties, authorizers continue to work together to achieve their own goals and those of their state charter law. These collaborations include the formation of authorizer networks or associations, the publication of state-specific charter authorizing resources, and the arrangement of statewide authorizing workshops. By fostering the development and exchange of best practices among charter school authorizers, these networking initiatives help ensure that the rising quantity of authorizers does not come at the expense of their quality. Below are examples of states in which such authorizer partnerships have been formed.

MINNESOTA

The [Minnesota Sponsors Assistance Network \(MSAN\)](#) took a first step towards unifying the many and varied charter sponsors throughout Minnesota when in February 2004, with leadership from Education/Evolving, it published "[Sponsoring Charters: A Resource Guide for Minnesota Chartering Agencies](#)." The guide recommends seven responsibilities that all sponsors should assume when chartering schools. More recently, MSAN has collaborated with the Minnesota Department of Education, the Minnesota Association of Charter Schools, and the Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota to provide mandatory training sessions for all of the state's charter school sponsors and board members. Before any new charter school opens its doors, MSAN and MDE experts go through a checklist with sponsors to make sure the school is ready to open. The intent of these statewide measures is to ensure that sponsors are holding charter schools to high standards of accountability.

GEORGIA

A [strategic plan](#) adopted by the Georgia State Board of Education in December 2004 sets out to strengthen the charter school movement in Georgia by encouraging local school districts to support charters and employ quality chartering practices. In furtherance of this goal, the State Board has teamed with NACSA to offer a series of statewide and regional workshops that provide guidance and technical assistance to local districts in developing sound authorizing practices in accordance with NACSA's [Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing](#). In addition, Georgia has arranged for statewide membership in NACSA, making membership benefits available to all active Georgia authorizers.

MICHIGAN

Formed in 1998, the Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers (MCCSA) was incorporated as a membership organization in 2002 to foster the exchange of information and resources among charter authorizers throughout the state. MCCSA developed [accountability standards](#) for charter schools, and through collaboration and refinement the Michigan Department of Education has endorsed these standards for charter schools. The intent of this initiative is to bring clarity and uniformity to the standards which form the basis for oversight of charter schools by Michigan authorizers. The Council continues to meet periodically to collectively discuss issues of importance to Michigan charter school authorizers.

OHIO

In 2003, state legislation was passed which redefined the role of the Ohio State Board of Education (ODE) in regard to the sponsorship of community schools (as charter schools are known in Ohio). The legislation stated that on July 1, 2005, instead of ODE continuing to directly sponsor individual community schools, ODE will become the “authorizer of community school sponsors.” The same 2003 legislation enabled nonprofit organizations, subject to an ODE application and interview process, to sponsor schools. With this new category of sponsor now on the horizon, there was a clear and immediate need to provide training and support to new charter school sponsors.

These new sponsors would have no small task, having to assume oversight of the 140 charter schools formerly sponsored by the Ohio State Board of Education. In order to create a pipeline of capable charter sponsors to fill this gap, the Ohio Foundation for School Choice and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, in collaboration with NACSA, formed the Ohio Charter School Sponsor Institute. Funded in part by the Ohio Department of Education, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation, the Institute helps qualified 501(c)(3) organizations become quality charter school sponsors by providing guidance and training on charter schools and authorizing practices essential for successful charter review and oversight. In addition to its training program, the Institute provides a communication network that allows for the ongoing exchange of best practices among charter sponsors.

Further Reading and Resources:

[“Minnesota Adopts Mandate to Improve Charter School Oversight,”](#) *Education Week*, January 12, 2005.

[Georgia Charter School Program Strategic Plan](#) (approved 12/09/04)

Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers [Accountability Standards](#)

Press Release: [“Institute to Prepare New Sponsors for Ohio Charter Schools,”](#) August 13, 2003.

NACSA *Noteworthy*

[Education Week](#) recently ran a [story](#) on what can be considered the ultimate challenge of charter school authorizers: closing a school that is not meeting expectations. **NACSA** members Marty Dezelan (Ball State University), Jim Goenner (Central Michigan University) and James Merriman (State University of New York) joined NACSA’s Executive Director Mark Cannon in providing insight on how quality authorizers attend to this “high-stakes” responsibility.

The **Ohio Charter School Sponsor Institute** is developing a tool to measure and evaluate organizational performance in charter schools. The Institute requests your help, insights, and experiences as it refines and finalizes the assessment instrument. You can help by filling out this [survey](#).

The [Charter School Leadership Council](#) celebrated its official launch on January 31st. With the goal of spurring national dialogue about charter school growth and quality, CSLC released a new [paper](#) authored by Bryan Hassel that summarizes 38 rigorous studies of charter achievement and announced a new [task force](#) on charter school quality and accountability.

A recent bill threatens to revoke the legislation allowing the **Colorado Charter School Institute** to authorize charter schools. Created last year with legislation sponsored by two Denver Democrats, the Institute was able to use its charter authorizing privileges to bypass the moratoriums placed by some districts on charter school creation. If the new bill is passed, the Institute would be dissolved and districts would regain sole control over the number of new charter schools created. For more information, see this [article](#) in the *Denver Post*.

As part of its [Renaissance 2010 plan](#) to create 100 new schools by the year 2010, **Chicago Public Schools** has recently approved 12 new schools for opening next fall. With four schools already approved and two more slated for approval later this month, a record total of 18 schools are expected to open in Chicago next year. Of these, six will be traditional schools and seven will be charter schools. The remaining five will be “performance” contract schools, based on a new CPS school model that closely resembles charters with regards to the autonomy it allows and the accountability it demands. For more information, see the [press release](#) issued by CPS.

Save the Date!

NACSA's **Florida Charter School Sponsors Intensive Seminar**, sponsored by the Broad Foundation, will be held **April 18-19** in Tampa, Florida. More details will be posted on our website soon.

NACSA's **2005 Annual Conference** will be held **October 24-25, 2005** in Denver, Colorado. Stay tuned for additional conference details.

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NACSA Notes is distributed by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, a membership association of educational agencies across the country that authorize and oversee charter public schools. NACSA promotes the development of high-quality educational options and is dedicated to strengthening the capacities of authorizers to charter successful schools. For more information about NACSA, visit our website, www.charterauthorizers.org.