

Successfully Authorizing Blended Charter Schools

Blended charter schools (sometimes called “hybrid charter schools”) provide student instruction at least in part at supervised brick-and-mortar locations, and at least in part through digital learning.¹ In 2009–2010, 142 charter schools identified themselves as implementing blended models. These charter schools served 61,182 students, approximately four percent of all charter school students in the United States.² While this is a relatively small percentage of the overall charter population, blended models have begun growing rapidly in recent years and are expected to continue to do so in the years ahead.³

Blended charter schools differ from typical brick-and-mortar charter schools and full-time online charter schools in the amount of time students spend online and in the scheduling and structure

of student time in supervised locations. Students enrolled in full-time online charter schools take all of their courses online, without a fixed schedule, from home or any location outside a school building.⁴ By contrast, students enrolled in blended charter schools may be in brick-and-mortar school buildings full-time but learn online during some or all of that time. Or students may split their learning time between in-school and out-of-school locations.⁵

Authorizing blended charter schools requires a mix of application review and oversight methods applicable to typical brick-and-mortar charter schools and full-time online charter schools. The nature of that mix depends on what the applicant intends to do in its program. Some blended charter schools can be treated appropriately as brick-and-mortar schools that have advanced technology applications

About This Issue Brief and the NACSA *Cyber Series*

This issue brief is part of NACSA's *Cyber Series*, which addresses issues in policy and practice that relate to authorizing online and blended charter schools. This brief aims to improve authorizer understanding and oversight of blended charter schools, which combine digital learning with instruction in brick-and-mortar locations.

For more detail on online education, see *An Updated Primer on Virtual Charter Schools: Mapping the Electronic Frontier*. For information on how to improve authorizer understanding and oversight of online charter schools generally, see *Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools: Guidelines for Ensuring School Quality in the Cloud*. For discussion of policy issues associated with online and blended charter schools, see NACSA's *Policy Guide: Online and Blended Charter Schools*.



embedded in their curriculum. Others have more in common with full-time cyber schools, and the review of their applications needs to reflect that design. Some authorizing policies and practices will be unique to the blended context, not precisely matched to either brick-and-mortar or full-time online schools. With a wide range of blended charter school models emerging, authorizers will need to be nimble in their approaches to blended charter schools.

This issue brief deals exclusively with the unique challenges of authorizing blended charter schools. A separate issue brief in NACSA's *Cyber Series* deals with a broader set of issues that authorizers confront with online schools, many of which also arise in the context of blended charter schools.⁶ Wherever a school falls on the continuum from brick-and-mortar to fully online, NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing* provides the foundation for strong authorizing. Both the issue brief on authorizing full-time online schools and this brief are aligned with NACSA's *Principles & Standards*.⁷

This brief begins with **an explanation of the variety of blended charter school models**, followed by a brief discussion of **key issues for authorizer awareness and consideration** in the blended charter school context, with attention to both initial approval and ongoing oversight. It then provides more specific **guidance on evaluating proposals** for blended charter schools. Finally, the brief provides general **recommendations for overseeing and evaluating** blended charter schools.

Understanding the Variety of Blended Charter School Models

Several years ago, fully online state-level and statewide virtual schools and programs drove the growth of K–12 online learning. However, local programs now appear to be the fastest growing and perhaps the largest segment of the field. Most of these programs are blended rather than fully online.⁸

As local blended programs flourish, enrollments in state virtual schools and full-time online charter schools also continue to expand, as do the number and variety of providers offering content, technology, instruction, and related services.⁹ In this rapidly evolving landscape, it is becoming increasingly helpful to define and classify existing and emerging blended models, and to distinguish them from traditional brick-and-mortar and full-time online schools. A variety of factors can be analyzed to determine what has been “blended” in a blending learning setting. Innosight Institute has introduced a typology of blended models.¹⁰ Public Impact has also drafted a set of definitions of models for extending the reach of excellent teachers to more children. Many of these models are compatible with blended learning.¹¹

The following table provides five of many possible examples along the continuum from traditional brick-and-mortar to full-time online charter schools. These examples contain several distinguishing variables, including: the percent of time spent working online, the roles of teachers and technology, and the physical location. Readers interested in additional examples should review Innosight Institute's detailed profiles of 40 existing or emerging blended programs, which include more than a dozen charter schools and CMOs.¹²

Numerous other blended models are possible along the continuum. For example:

- **High Tech High** in San Diego uses blended programs only for some math and foreign language courses, with face-to-face courses for the rest of the curriculum.
- At **Hawaii Technology Academy**, which enrolls students from six different islands, roughly 20 percent of students attend courses online most or all of the time, with some visiting learning centers once a week; another 20 percent or so attend learning centers five days a week; and the remaining 60 percent rotate more evenly between learning centers and online learning from home.

Table 1. Examples of Brick-and-Mortar, Blended, and Full-Time Online Charter Schools¹³

Type of School ¹⁴	Typical Brick-and-Mortar	Blended—Rotation Model	Blended—Flex Model	Blended—Flex Model; Alternative Education Center	Full-time Online Charter
Example	Typical charter school	Carpe Diem Collegiate High School and Middle School (CDCHS) (grades 6–12)	San Francisco Flex Academy (6–12, starting with 9–12)	LifeSkills Centers (White Hat Management, ages 16–21, dropout recovery)	Georgia Cyber Academy (grades K–10)
Description	Looks and functions like typical brick-and-mortar school; might have a computer lab or workstations in the classroom	Students attend extended days, four days a week; students rotate between online activities in a learning center and face-to-face classroom instruction, where a “coach,” or teacher, re-teaches, enhances, or applies the material introduced online; each rotation lasts 55 minutes; students complete the online/face-to-face cycle two to three times a day	K12 Inc. delivers curriculum and instruction, but learning management system directs students to engage in offline activities; face-to-face teachers use a data dashboard to plan targeted interventions and supplementations throughout the day	Alternative education charter schools serve dropouts or students at risk of dropping out; school day is four hours long; students begin in a “transition lab” and then move to large lab to complete online courses; centers use Apex Learning for all content delivery; two certified teachers are on hand in the lab to provide flexible support as needed	Uses curriculum and services provided by K12 Inc.; all daily lessons, teacher interaction, and attendance conducted online
Percent of time in digital learning	0–10%	Typically 25-50% 50% in Carpe Diem; in elementary schools using similar “rotation,” digital time is typically 25–50%	Most Varies for core courses, but online platform is the primary mode for students; online teachers deliver most electives	Up to 100% Flexible support provided by face-to-face teachers as needed	100% 100% of daily lessons and teacher interaction conducted online
Roles of adults	Traditional teacher roles Typically one teacher, one classroom	Certified teachers teach given subjects and in offline rotations; highly-qualified paraprofessionals assist with online instruction Full-time certified teachers teach all grades in a given subject and provide face-to-face instruction during offline rotations; highly qualified paraprofessionals offer students direction and help during online instruction periods	Teachers monitor student performance and lead targeted activities Teachers monitor student performance and call students in for specific tutoring or to have a specific face-to-face experience; paraprofessionals assist teachers and supervise students	Remote teachers and some onsite teachers provide support Online courses taught by offsite teachers through Apex Learning; two certified teachers staff labs to provide flexible teaching support	Remote teaching Students interact with state-certified teachers through email, telephone, and online meetings
Role of technology	Limited Typically limited; might have “smart boards” or limited access to online resources	Content delivery Carpe Diem uses e2020 for content of online instruction; the school building has 300 cubicles and computers in a learning center	Content delivery and learning management K12 Inc. platform is the starting point for delivering all curricula and assessments; database integrates progress and assessment data with other student data	Content delivery and learning management LifeSkills Centers use Apex Learning curriculum for all content delivery	Content delivery and learning management Georgia Cyber Academy uses curriculum and services provided by K12 Inc.; 100% of daily lessons, teacher interaction, and attendance conducted online
Location	Physical school building	Modified physical school building Custom designed to blended approach; traditional classrooms and learning center with 300 cubicles and computers	Modified physical school building Spaces converted to fit blended model	Renovated buildings or storefronts Large lab space with workstations for 35 to 40 students	No designated location Any location with reliable Internet access, often students’ homes; field trips and social events held throughout the year

- **KIPP Empower Academy** in Los Angeles rotates students among computers, small-group instruction, and individualized instruction.
- **Cornerstone Health High School** in Detroit groups students in pods of 50, representing various ages and abilities, and moves students through content without set schedules, advancing students based on academic or social maturity, without regard to the calendar year.

It is becoming increasingly helpful to define and classify existing and emerging blended models, and to distinguish them from traditional brick-and-mortar and full-time online schools.

- **Six Rivers Charter High School** in Arcata, California, provides instruction in traditional classrooms for five periods and online instruction in core subjects with face-to-face facilitators for a sixth period. The school also operates a learning center for students who wish to enroll in an alternative program that allows them to study remotely for four days a week and attend the center on the fifth day or more frequently, based on student need.¹⁵

Along with the wide variety in blended models illustrated above, policies governing these models differ dramatically from state to state. Distinctions among models may determine whether the model counts as “brick-and-mortar,” “blended” or “online,” or triggers related provisions under state law. Model characteristics may also impact significant operational issues such as the amount of per-pupil funding provided, designation of the “teacher of record” for each individual student, and whether schools meet federal “highly qualified teacher” requirements.¹⁶

Key Issues in Authorizing Blended Charter Schools

The range of blended alternatives poses significant challenges for authorizers. In confronting these challenges, authorizers should be mindful of several key issues.

Good authorizing is good authorizing. The principles and standards applicable to brick-and-mortar charter authorizing apply as well in the full-time online and blended contexts.¹⁷ In these new environments, the authorizer’s main challenge is to modify and supplement customary practices to account for unique factors presented by online learning.

Blended models come in many shapes and sizes.

There are no clear criteria for determining how much digital instruction makes a school “blended.” Some blended charter schools look and act more like full-time online schools, while others function more like typical brick-and-mortar schools. Authorizers must be prepared to evaluate proposals and monitor schools along the entire continuum between those that involve little online learning and those where nearly all instruction is delivered online. Because many states have policies that treat online schools differently from other schools, many issues of charter school oversight can hinge on the technical definition of whether a blended model is to be treated as an online school or a brick-and-mortar school. Depending on the circumstances, there may be incentives driving operators to alter how they organize their schools or how they present proposed models that are designed primarily to adjust which definition applies to their circumstance.

Blended models offer the potential to repurpose existing school funding to more valuable uses.

Some proponents of online learning suggest that online courses will lower per-pupil costs. Blended operators may forecast similar benefits, but many instead tout the benefits of reallocation. Instead of simply promising to educate children for less, these operators argue that they can obtain stronger student results by repurposing existing sums, putting the money invested in each child’s education to more productive use such as paying excellent teachers more or improving the quality of digital learning. Authorizers should encourage the development of blended models that innovate around school design and staffing to make the most of the often scarce funding they receive.

Many blended models offer strong opportunities to collect and use student data. Part of the promise of new, blended schools is the extent to which technology permits them to collect and use student performance data.

With students engaged in digital instruction, blended schools can collect data far more frequently—perhaps weekly or even daily. Authorizers can tap these data streams by requiring operators to share available data for consideration in oversight and monitoring.

Authorizers and charter school boards often lack expertise in blended learning.

New blended-learning models may challenge even the most experienced authorizers. Some authorizers may want to develop expertise in blended learning models in-house. Others may decide to import expertise about blended models and education technology from academics, researchers, and practitioners. Authorizers should also see to it that

applicants have detailed plans to create or develop boards that are prepared to understand and manage the challenges of governing blended charter schools.

Blended charter schools may face unique challenges in complying with special-education laws.

Both face-to-face and digital instruction must comply with legal requirements related to students with disabilities. Authorizers should monitor blended charter schools' compliance with pertinent laws, even though a portion of student education is provided over the Internet and in some cases may be delivered to students outside the traditional classroom environment and through a mix of live instruction, synchronous and asynchronous communications from teachers, and smart software.

Authorizers of blended charter schools should identify, develop, and share best practices.

Many authorizers' approaches to blended charter school applications and oversight are new or nonexistent. Networking and the sharing of lessons learned will help authorizers improve their policies and practices over time. Authorizers should enable operators to experiment and adjust their approaches, provided they offer details of their operations and data on their results to allow authorizers to monitor the schools and to begin to identify, develop, and share best practices.

Some blended charter schools will present additional issues common in the context of full-time online schools, such as third-party contracts with management organizations or service providers, and operators replicating existing programs and school designs. For further discussion of these issues, we refer the reader to the companion issue brief in NACSA's *Cyber Series*, *Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools: Guidelines for Ensuring School Quality in the Cloud*.¹⁸

Evaluating Proposals for Blended Charter Schools

Many issues presented by proposals for online charter schools and brick-and-mortar charter schools also arise in the blended context.¹⁹ In evaluating proposals for blended charter schools, authorizers should follow NACSA's *Principles & Standards* for reviewing charter applications generally, and should also consider the general recommendations for evaluating virtual charter school proposals highlighted in the companion issue brief, *Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools: Guidelines for Ensuring School Quality in the Cloud*.²⁰ Here we focus solely on issues with unique applicability to the evaluation

of proposals for blended charter schools.

In evaluating blended charter proposals, authorizers should carefully examine and assess the issues listed below. A separate application format may not be required for blended schools, especially those in which students attend a brick-and-mortar school full-time. Instead, the issues below can be probed with specific questions added to the existing application document.

- *Coherence of the overall education program*—how the school will combine face-to-face instruction and online learning to generate a promising overall program for students. Authorizers might require demonstrations of blended lessons or their components.
- *Scheduling, attendance, and access issues*—how much time during a typical school week students will be onsite at the school. For schools where the “blend” involves students working at home or off-site some or most of the time, schools will need systems for verifying student attendance and participation. In blended schools where students attend classes in a school building all day, every day, this topic will be no different than with traditional authorizing.
- *Roles of teachers and non-teaching staff*, including how they will differ from—and improve upon—traditional roles. One of the promises of blended learning is the opportunity to leverage limited teaching talent by freeing up teachers' time while students are learning digitally, or by enabling teachers to reach students remotely using technology. Authorizers might require applicants to detail the roles of teachers and non-teaching staff in areas such as instruction, coaching, advising, monitoring student progress, analyzing and planning based on student data, managing behavior, and other critical aspects of instruction. They could ask applicants to explain what kinds of teachers and other staff are likely to thrive in the blended environment, how they will find and select staff, and what kinds of non-traditional professional development will be needed to support the school's innovative design.
- *Significant departures from traditional class sizes and student/teacher ratios*—and how the applicant anticipates staffing under its proposal will benefit students.
- *Flexibility of the educational program*. Blended learning models promise high degrees of personalization or customization to the needs and

styles of individual learners. Some programs might allow students to proceed through online course material at their own pace. Some might include interim assessments that drive adjustments to a student's educational program. Some might vary the mix of online and in-person instruction depending on student performance and preferences. Authorizers might ask applicants to describe in detail how their programs can be adjusted based on student progress and learning needs and styles.

For blended schools in which students attend a brick-and-mortar facility full-time, oversight of blended charter schools need not differ dramatically from oversight of other charter schools.

- *Outreach and provision of services to students with special needs*—how a proposed blended school will provide services to students with special needs, including students with disabilities and English language learners, and how the school proposes to conduct outreach and recruitment to ensure access to these students.
- *Types of software to be used for digital learning*—the software or online learning applications to be used in the digital portion of the blended program, with evidence of efficacy of the chosen media, ideally with students who are similar to the school's target population.
- *Free access to necessary hardware and broadband*—the steps that schools will take to provide all students with all hardware and connectivity necessary to access any portion of the educational program that will be completed away from the school site, as well as technical support, without cost to students' families.
- *Systems and process for collecting, managing, and using student data*—including systems and processes for monitoring student attendance, progress, and performance in both the online and face-to-face components of blended programs. Applications should detail how the school will verify completion and mastery of course material; when and on what basis credits accrue; the frequency and types of assessments for online coursework; and systems for communicating about data and student progress among teachers, parents, and students.
- *Plans and authority for school-level management of relationships with education service providers (ESPs),*

education management organizations (EMOs), and charter management organizations (CMOs)—details of proposed relationships between school operators, boards, and external entities, including an explanation of how the school and board will maintain their independence and how they will hold external partners accountable for their contributions to student learning, including terminating partnerships, if necessary.²¹

- *Expertise of governing board in blended learning*—existing expertise or how the board will develop expertise in blended learning among its members over time.
- *Operators' growth intentions and capacity to manage growth without sacrificing program quality.* Even for new applicants, authorizers might consider asking about their growth intentions, as well as their systems and strategies for managing growth. Some authorizers might vet applicants in part based on which ones show the most promising plans for serving large numbers of high-needs students with high-quality instruction.
- *Financial plans and facilities to implement the proposed blended program*—how the school's proposed budget will provide funding for in-person instruction, facilities, and hardware and software necessary to implement the blended program. If any special facilities (or modifications to existing facilities) are needed, the applicant should demonstrate plans and adequate finances budgeted to meet these needs.

Overseeing and Evaluating Blended Charter Schools

For blended schools in which students attend a brick-and-mortar facility full-time, oversight of blended charter schools need not differ dramatically from oversight of other charter schools. In such schools, as in typical brick-and-mortar schools, NACSA recommends that authorizers focus on outcomes and student performance rather than process; monitor compliance with contract terms; ensure school autonomy; protect student rights; inform intervention, revocation, and renewal decisions; and provide public accountability on school performance.²² The more time that students spend off-site, the more relevant the recommendations in the companion brief, *Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools*, become. For any blended school, however, authorizers should focus some oversight on the issues discussed above and in the following additional areas:

- *School operations*, including the school's processes for overseeing student progress and content mastery and tailoring the educational program to individual student learning styles and needs
- *Fidelity to the school's charter and contract*, to ensure full implementation of agreed-upon aspects of the school model in areas such as staffing, curriculum, scheduling, and the use of data to improve and personalize instruction
- *Compliance with pertinent legal requirements*, which may include a blend of requirements that typically apply to brick-and-mortar schools and those that relate to full-time online schools depending on the school's particular model
- *Access to the school's educational program* granted to all eligible students, including compliance with IDEA and other pertinent state and federal statutes and regulations related to students with disabilities and English Language Learners
- If *site visits* are included in oversight and evaluation, conventional school visit protocols may need to be altered for blended charter schools to cover both face-to-face and online instruction

Conclusion

As authorizers increasingly evaluate proposals for blended charter schools and prepare to oversee and evaluate these schools, they will need to craft appropriate combinations of traditional authorizing, practices applicable to online charter schools, and approaches unique to the blended charter context. This issue brief discusses approaches unique to blended charter schools. Authorizers should use this brief in tandem with *Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools: Guidelines for Ensuring School Quality in the Cloud*, which covers a wide range of issues applicable to online schools, including many applicable in the blended context, and NACSA's *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, which continues to articulate the foundational principles and standards for good authorizing, whether in blended, full-time online, or brick-and-mortar charter schools.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Horn, M. B., & Staker, H. (2011). *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning* (p. 3). Charter School Growth Fund, Innosight Institute, and Public Impact. Available: <http://www.innosightinstitute.org/innosight/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/The-Rise-of-K-12-Blended-Learning.pdf>. Also see Vanourek, G., & Evergreen Education Group. (2011). *An (Updated) Primer on Virtual Charter Schools: Mapping the Electronic Frontier* (p. 2). Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA); Ableidinger, J., & Hassel, B. (Public Impact) (2012). *Online and Blended Charter Schools* (Policy Guide). Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers.
- ² National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. *The Public Charter Schools Dashboard: A Comprehensive Data Resource from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools*. Available: <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home> (2009–10 data).
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- ⁴ Lin, M. (2011). *School Quality in the Cloud: Guidelines for Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools* (p. 1). Chicago, IL: National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Available: http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/publications/Issue_Briefs/NACSA_Cyber_Series_MargaretLinIssueBrief.pdf.
- ⁵ Ableidinger & Hassel, *Online and Blended Charter Schools* (Policy Guide).
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- ⁷ National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2010). *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*. Chicago, IL: Author. Available: http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/publications/Principles_and_Standards_2010.pdf.
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- ¹⁰ Horn & Staker, *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning*, 4-5
- ¹¹ See: <http://www.opportunityculture.org/reach>.
- ¹² Staker, H. (2011). *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning: Profiles of Emerging Models*. Mountain View, CA: Innosight Institute and the Charter School Growth Fund. Available: <http://www.innosightinstitute.org/innosight/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/The-Rise-of-K-12-Blended-Learning.pdf>.
- ¹³ Three blended examples adapted from Staker, *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning: Profiles of Emerging Models*; full-time online example taken from Georgia Cyber Academy website, <http://www.k12.com/gca>.
- ¹⁴ See Staker, *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning: Profiles of Emerging Models*. In the “rotation model,” students rotate on a fixed schedule between learning online in one-to-one, self-paced environments and learning in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Face-to-face teachers typically oversee the online work. In the “flex model,” most of the curriculum is delivered through an online platform in a supervised brick-and-mortar setting. Teachers typically provide support on a flexible and adaptive as-needed basis through individual tutoring, small-group sessions, and full-class experiences. The amount of face-to-face support varies widely from school to school.
- ¹⁵ Blended examples adapted from Staker, *The Rise of K–12 Blended Learning: Profiles of Emerging Models*.
- ¹⁶ For further discussion of policy issues associated with online and blended learning, see Ableidinger & Hassel, *Online and Blended Charter Schools* (Policy Guide).
- ¹⁷ NACSA, *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*.
- ¹⁸ Lin, *School Quality in the Cloud: Guidelines for Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools*, 4-5.
- ¹⁹ For issues applicable to online schools, see Lin, M. *School Quality in the Cloud: Guidelines for Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools*; For issues applicable to brick-and-mortar charter schools, see NACSA, *Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*.
- ²⁰ NACSA, *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, 12-13; Lin, *School Quality in the Cloud: Guidelines for Authorizing Virtual Charter Schools*, 8-9.
- ²¹ See NACSA, *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, especially Box 2, “Elements for Applicants Proposing to Contract with Education Service or Management Providers.”
- ²² NACSA, *Principles & Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing*, 7, 16-17, 21 (Box 4).

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